

GAṄGĀ

C. SIVARAMAMURTI



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Foreword by
Shrimati Indira Gandhi



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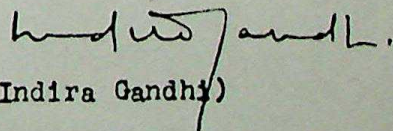


PRIME MINISTER

FOREWORD

It is not strange that the Ganga should have such an extraordinary hold on the imagination of the people of India. For millennia she has watered and nurtured an entire civilisation, and has become a symbol of eternity and a theme of art, legend and literature. The moods of rivers are fascinating to watch but even more so are the faith and reverence they evoke in the hearts of millions. To one born in Allahabad this is imprinted on the mind by the constant stream of pilgrims who journey long distances to take a quick dip in the waters of the Ganga.

Dr. Sivaramamurti's little book is useful introduction to what my father called "a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilisation, ever-changing, ever-flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga".


(Indira Gandhi)

New Delhi,
August 1, 1976.

Preface

1902

When a little boy, as my mother used to reverently rub and wash small sealed vessels of Ganges water in our household worship, and occasionally open one to pour a little into a large vessel of water and drain it all on our heads, symbolically giving us a bath in the Ganges with the innocent belief that we had really had a plunge in the celestial river thereby, I used to wistfully think of the day when I would have a real dip in the stream itself near Varanasi.

This great good fortune befell me in January 1944 on my way back home from excavations at Ahichchhatra. I can never forget the kindness of Sri Raikrishnadasji who sent me to have a dip in the Ganges early in the morning. With the mist all around the silvery stream, there was a feeling in my mind that it would be unbearably cold. But the moment I dipped into the river with my head below water level, it was warm and pleasant. It was like the river goddess, the mother herself, taking me into herself and warming me up. It may be just a hallucination, but I felt that I saw everything celestial in her. Varanasi, or at any rate, the landscape against the river, the stream itself, everything looked so transformed, that I had the illusion I was transported to heaven and was actually bathing in the celestial stream. 'Is it not this river, for a bath in which thousands and millions of all of us long all our life? How fortunate that I have purified myself today by a bath in her sacred stream!' this was my thought. Almost in my mind, I addressed the river as mother and gave her my prostration before I returned.

I have ever felt from that day on that I should write on this sacred river, this great celestial stream that purifies the earth, the heavens and the netherworld. A few years later, Dr Radha Kumud Mookerji, the veteran old scholar of Indian culture, demanded of me an article on Gaṅgā for a newly started journal, *Himalaya*. I gladly wrote the article and it was profusely illustrated. He was pleased indeed and told me that Gaṅgā would bless me for this. But having been thinking of Gaṅgā all the time, my mind was not satisfied with a mere article on the sacred stream. I wanted to write a small book on Gaṅgā bringing out her characteristics with appropriate illustrations, as the Indian sculptor and painter had always revelled in glorifying her.

My very first book, *Sculpture Inspired by Kalidasa* was called for and read by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru when he was in Yeravada Jail. His appreciation of the book was in the shape of a blessing for a young writer who had just begun his life. Panditji was among the most ardent admirers of Gaṅgā. In fact from Allahabad he could experience all the beauty and charm of Gaṅgā at the Triveni and could fully comprehend the charm that that most mellifluous of poets, Kalidasa, has immortalised in his verses describing the *saṅgama*. I made up my mind that if I wrote a book on Gaṅgā, Panditji should bless it with his foreword. But life is so evanescent that he departed before I could accomplish the little booklet that I planned. The Indian belief is that the father survives in his progeny. I thus made bold to request his daughter who, born and brought up on the lap of the *saṅgama*, is no less attached to this divine stream that is vouchsafed for us on earth as we on the soil of Bharat fondly believe. I am most grateful to our beloved Prime Minister, Srimati Indira Gandhi for this fulfilment of my desire and for her gracious compliance with my request.

I am grateful to the Archaeological Survey, the National Museum, the British Museum, the Fine Arts Museum, Boston, for the several photographs that have been made available for decorating this little book. I am also grateful to Orient Longman for undertaking its publication and accomplishing this in a manner worthy of book production, making it a thing of beauty and thereby a joy for ever.

New Delhi,
May 8, 1976

C. Sivaramamurti

List of Illustrations

1. Brahmā pouring water on Viṣṇu's foot, Hoysaḷa, 12th century A.D., Nuggihallī, Mysore.
2. Brahmā pouring water on Viṣṇu's foot, Western Cālukya, 12th century A.D., Hampi, Mysore.
3. Umāsaḥita Śiva receiving Gaṅgā on his locks, approaching in *Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa*, *karaṇa*, 10th century A.D., Nepal.
4. Gaṅgādhara, close-up, suggesting the receiving of Gaṅgā on his locks by Śiva. Early Coḷa, 9th century A.D., Koḍumbālūr, Tamil Nadu.
5. Gaṅgā as *cāmaradhāriṇī*, along with Gaurī, for Naṭarāja dancing on bull. Pāla, 11th century A.D., Śaṅkarabandhā, Bangla Desh.
6. Gaṅgā approaching Śiva as a bride, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Rajouna, Bihar.
7. Gaṅgādhara appeasing Pārvatī, while receiving Gaṅgā on his locks. Early Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Gaṅgaikoṇḍacoḷapuram, Tamil Nadu.
8. Gaṅgādhara with Pārvatī vexed with her face turned away. Early Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Māyūram, Tamil Nadu.
9. Close up of Gaṅgā on the *jaṭās* of Naṭarāja, Early Coḷa, 11th century, A.D.
10. Close up of Gaṅgā as a garland on Naṭarāja's locks. Early Coḷa, 10th century A.D., Taṇḍamtottam, Tamil Nadu.
11. Gaṅgā as an umbrella or *caurī* or canopy above Śiva, Pallava, 7th century A.D., Kāñcīpuram, Tamil Nadu, National Museum.
12. Gaṅgā with a stream as her lower part, late Coḷa, 12th century A.D., Dārāsuram, Tamil Nadu.
13. Naṭarāja with Gaṅgā on his *jaṭās*. Early Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Art Gallery, Tañjāvūr, Tamil Nadu.
14. Wavy pattern of *jaṭās* for Naṭarāja, late Coḷa, 12th century A.D.
15. Gaṅgā, compassionate, and purifier of thought, beside Dakṣiṇā-mūrti, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Ahicchatrā, Uttar Pradesh.
- 15a.

16. Bāṇagaṅgā, a jet issuing to reach Bhīṣma lying on a bed of arrows. MS illustration, Kāśmīr school, 19th century A.D., National Museum.
17. Bhīṣma on bed of arrows surrounded by sages sent by Gaṅgā, Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa, Kīśāgarh school, 18th century A.D., Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, Banaras.
18. Bhīṣma on *śaratalpa* or bed of arrows surrounded by sages, some in the guise of *haṁsas* (geese), Kauravas, Pāṇḍavas, and Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, in a chariot. Early Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭadakal, Karnataka.
19. Gaṅgā as Nadīmātrkā on either side of Nāgarāja Mucalinda, Sātavāhana, 2nd century A.D., Amarāvati, Andhra Pradesh.
20. Goddess carrying food and water, Naḍīmātrkā, Kuṣāṇa, 2nd & 20a. century A.D., Bharat Kala Bhavan, Vārāṇasī, Uttar Pradesh.
21. Goddess carrying food and water, Naḍīmātrkā, Kuṣāṇa, 2nd century A.D., Mathurā Museum, Uttar Pradesh.
22. Pūrṇakumbha representing Gaṅgā and Yamunā flanking the doorway. Early Western Cālukya, 6th century A.D., Aihole, Mysore.
23. Gaṅgā as guardian of gateway on doorjamb, Vijayanagara, 16th century A.D., Hampi, Mysore.
24. Terracottas, the largest of the kind, representing Gaṅgā and Yamunā as guardians of the gateway of Śiva, Ahicchatrā, Uttar Pradesh.
25. Gaṅgā and Yamunā as guardians of the gateway of Śiva, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Dah Parvatiya, Assam.
26. Close up of Gaṅgā and Yamunā as guardians of the gateway of Śiva, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Dah Parvatiya, Assam.
27. Gaṅgā on her *makara* with attendants as guardians of the doorway. Gurjara Pratihāra, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh.
28. The confluence of the three rivers, Trivenī saṅgama, Gupta, 4th century A.D., Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh.
29. Gaṅgā as Suranimnagā or heavenly stream under the Kalpa tree. Sena, 12th century A.D., Mahānāḍ, West Bengal.
30. Gaṅgāvisarjanamūrti, Rāṣṭrakūṭa, 8th century A.D., Ellora.
31. Gaṅgādhara receiving Gaṅgā as a triple stream, Tripathagā Trisrotas, Vākāṭaka, 5th century A.D., Elephantā, Maharashtra.

32. Story of Gaṅgā, Gaṅgā and Vasus, Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭaḍakal, Mysore.
33. Gaṅgā flowing onto Śiva's locks and released therefrom by the prayers of Bhagīratha, Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭaḍakal, Mysore.
34. Gaṅgā received in the water vessel of sage Jahnu and released again through his ear to flow from the Himālaya. Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭaḍakal, Mysore.
35. Gaṅgā flowing past the *diggajas* in Pātāla to purify the sins of the sons of Sagara. Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭaḍakal, Mysore.
36. Gaṅgā descending on Śiva's locks, Śiva appeasing Pārvatī. Vijayanagara, 16th century A.D., Lepākṣī, Andhra Pradesh.
37. Gaṅgādhara with one foot placed on ignorance represented by a dwarf, and receiving the pure and enlightening Gaṅgā. Pallava, 7th century A.D., Tiruchirāpaḷli, Tamil Nadu.
38. Penance and *nityakarmānuṣṭhāna* — *snāna*, *sūryopasthāna*, *diṅnamaskāra*, *Vāsodaka*, etc. Pallava, 7th century A.D., Mahābalipuram, Tamil Nadu.
39. The three streams, Sarasvatī, Gaṅgā and Yamunā, Rāṣṭrakūta, 8th century A.D., Ellora.
40. Commemorative Gold Coin of Rājendra Coḷa, Coḷa tiger flanked by Cera bow and Pāṇḍya fish with legend on obverse and reverse in Nāgarī : *Gaṅgaikoṇḍa Coḷaḥ*, 11th century A.D., National Museum.
41. Khaḍga Gold Coin of Kumāragupta, obverse: King on horse fighting rhinoceros and legend *bhartā Khaḍgatrātā Kumāragupto jayatyanīṣam*; reverse : Gaṅgā standing on *makara*, umbrella held over her and legend *Śrī Mahendra-Khaḍga*, National Museum.
42. River goddess with jets of water issuing from *pūrṇakumbha* breasts as from a fountain, Śailendra, 11th century A.D., Belahan, East Java.

Dedication

affectionately
to my mother
C. Marakatavalli
and my sister
P. Rajalakshmi
who also was a
mother to me

Contents

Foreword : Shrimati Indira Gandhi	.. v
Preface	.. vii
List of Illustrations	.. ix
Dedication	.. xiii
1 Gaṅgā, Her Origin	.. 1
2 Consequences of Her Pride	.. 7
3 Śiva's Consort	.. 17
4 Adornment of Śiva	.. 27
5 Gaṅgā's Many Forms	.. 35
6 Gaṅgā, Purifier	.. 43
7 Mother, Sustainer and Daughter	.. 49
8 Her Other Manifestations	.. 85
Bibliography	.. 97

1. Gaṅgā, Her Origin

In the vast subcontinent of India, fed by hundreds of streams that irrigate her fertile soil, Gaṅgā is yet a name to conjure with. To Indians Gaṅgā is not just a river among the many others in the country. She is not even earthly, and it is by a special grace that she flows on earth. She is the heavenly stream brought to the earth by the persistent efforts of many princes of Sagara's family, generation after generation, till at last one of them succeeded in coaxing her to come down not only to earth, but to proceed further to the netherworld, to purify the ashes of his ancestors, so that they could be assured absolution from their sins if any, and transportation to heaven, the waves of the stream acting as the steps of a staircase leading to the highest goal. It is in this context that Gaṅgā is considered a soaring ladder to heaven for the sons of Sagara: *svarga sopāna paṅktim*.

Gaṅgā's origin in Brahmā's waterpot

Gaṅgā is the holy water in the *kamaṇḍalu* or the water vessel of Brahmā, the purest concept of knowledge of ritual and philosophic thought. The book in Brahmā's hand is a symbol of his vast philosophical knowledge, the highest *parā vidyā*. The *sruk* or the sacrificial ladle and the water vessel suggest that he is the initiator of Vedic ritual itself. The *abhiṣeka* which precedes and concludes all ceremonies, particularly Vedic sacrifices, mainly depends on *tīrtha-jala*, holy water. This most sacred water is that of Gaṅgā. She purifies even the purest and she rests in the water vessel of Brahmā. Poured on the head as in *abhiṣeka*, she purifies the outer frame, the physical body. By a sip or *ācamana*, she purifies the interior of the body. Even a look at her waters creates mental peace and calm, and a sense of purification dawns on one forthwith. From the water vessel, she is poured on the feet of a worshipful one as a token of respect and welcome. This is in *pādya* for the *pāda* or the legs, which immediately follows *arghya*, her water poured in the palms as worshipful offering to cleanse them.

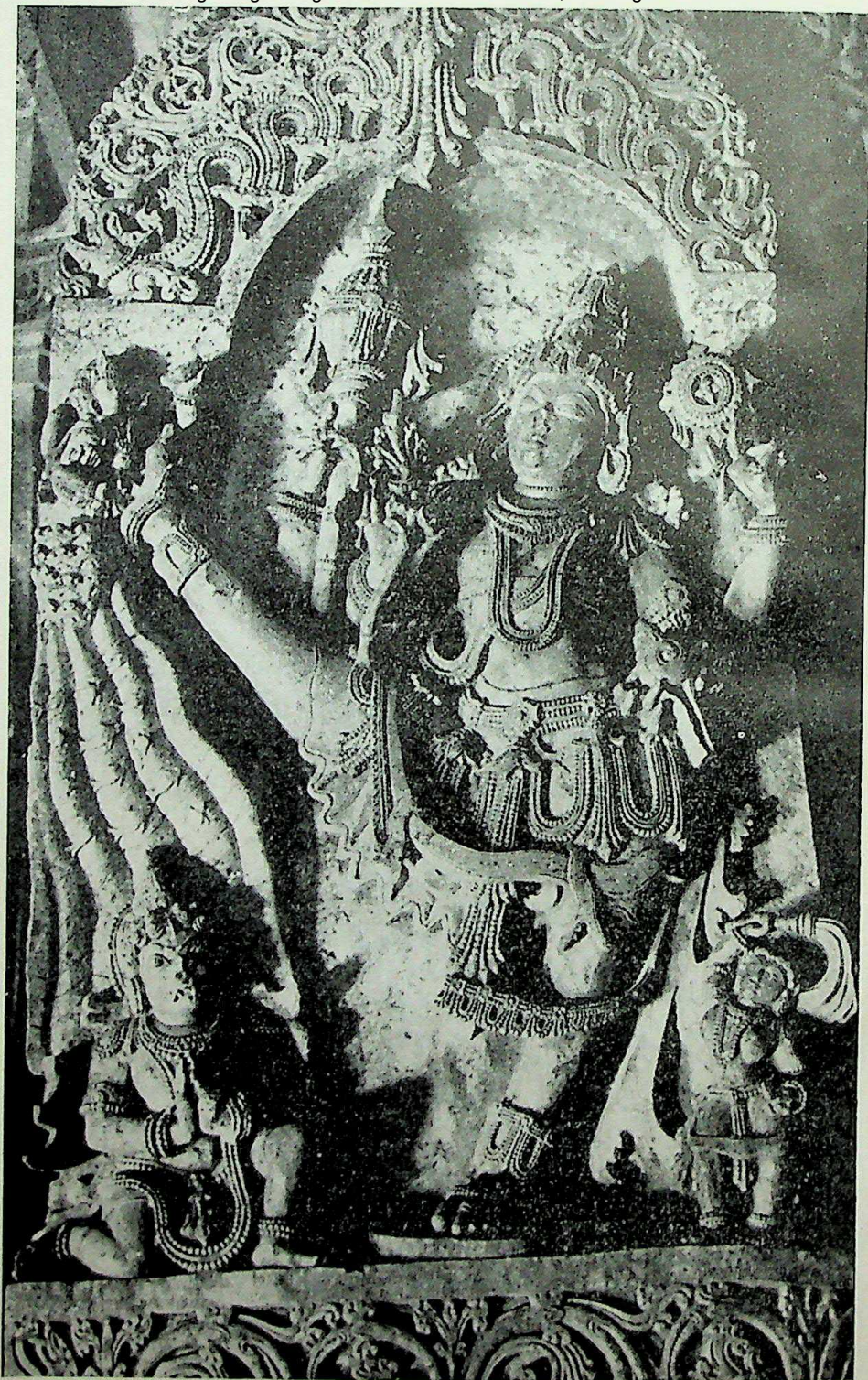


Fig. 1. Brahmā pouring water on Viṣṇu's foot, Hoysaḷa, 12th century A.D., Nuggihalli, Mysore.

Viṣṇupadī, Gaṅgā issues from the foot of Viṣṇu in the sky

When Vāmana assumed the form of Trivikrama and encompassed the entire universe covering the total terrestrial area with one foot and the entire celestial sphere with his upraised left foot, Brahmā poured water on this in token of his worshipful attitude (Fig. 1). The water that issued from the *kamaṇḍalu* of Brahmā cleansed the foot of Viṣṇu and flowed down to reach the *jaṭās* of Śiva ultimately. Gaṅgā is therefore Viṣṇupadī, the stream that emanated from Viṣṇu's foot. This is also a veiled expression of her origin in Viṣṇupada, the sky. The term connotes both the foot of Viṣṇu and the celestial region. The sky itself is so called by virtue of its having been encompassed by the foot of Viṣṇu raised by Trivikrama as he covered the universe in his three strides.

On a door lintel from Hampi, an excellent example of late Cālukyan work, there is not only the Trimūrti shown in three panels that form its main decoration, but there is also intricate workmanship all around on the *makara toraṇa* design meandering from the gaping mouth of one *makara* to the other with tiny musical figures of *gaṇas* in all possible manner of tiny medallions formed by the undulating creeper design. At the top, there are exquisite miniature figures in groups composing and narrating scenes from the sacrifice of Bali, Vāmana begging for just a three foot space from Bali, the emperor of the demons, and his subsequent transformation into the universe-encompassing Trivikrama. Over the foot raised towards the sky Brahmā, standing in respect, is shown pouring from his *kamaṇḍalu* the holy stream of Gaṅgā (Fig. 2). This is a very graphic representation in an exquisite miniature sculpture panel of the celestial origin of the heavenly river. These miniature carvings on this long and interesting lintel, are often missed or unnoticed, but they are more significant than even the larger figures, because the glory of the trinity is narrated here, and particularly of Viṣṇu who completely covered the expanse of the universe thus justifying the name Viṣṇu, and from whose foot Gaṅgā herself issued and received the appellation, Viṣṇupadī.

Nūpuragaṅgā

As Brahmā hurried to worship the foot of Viṣṇu raised skywards in his Trivikrama form, by offering water from his *kamaṇḍalu*, Gaṅgā originating from it, fell on the *nūpura* or the anklet, and from that dropped to the earth, almost to disappear in Śiva's locks, though probably untouched even by the *jaṭās*. Therefrom she descended as a tiny stream on Mount Vṛṣabha or Aḷagarmalai, and is known as

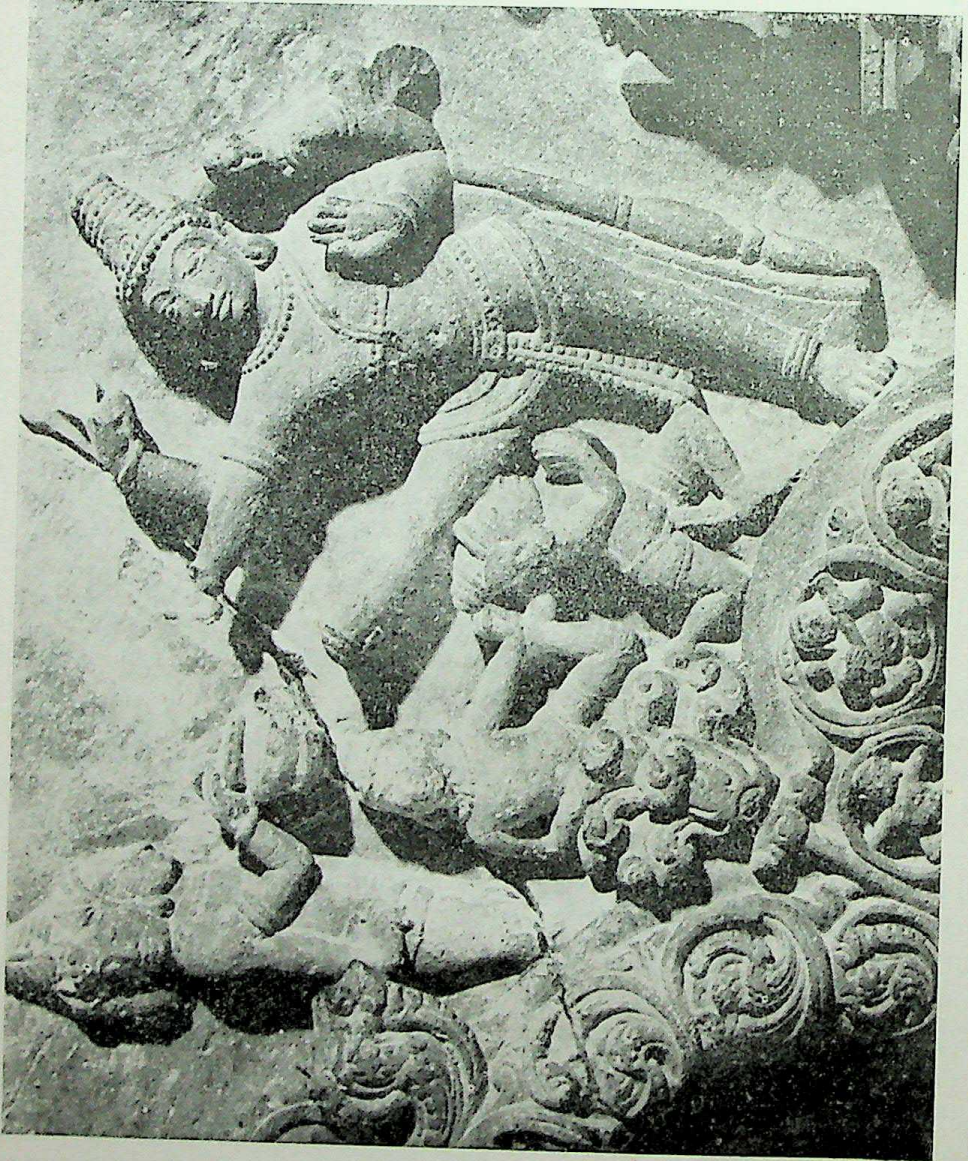


Fig. 2. Brahmā pouring water on Viṣṇu's foot, Western Cālukya, 12th century A.D., Hampi, Mysore.

Nūpuragaṅgā, or Gaṅgā proceeding from the anklet, who removes all sins. There is usually a belief that water when it drips from the hair is impure, but falling from the locks of Śiva which comprise one of the *pañcamahābhūtas*, i.e. *ākāśa* or ether, Śiva being Vyomakeśa, it is entirely purifying and sanctifying. That is why there is a school of thought which is amused by even the thought of impiety voiced in the remark that those, avoiding a bath in the Ganges because it fell from Śiva's locks, are like those who do not bathe in the holy ocean as it is the abode of briny water :

*na gāhante gaṅgām api harajaṭāsāra it ye
na majjantiyambhodhau lavaṇarasaveśantaka iti.*

Venkaṭanātha's description of *Nūpuragaṅgā* is indeed significant. On the summit of Mount Vṛṣabha, the eternal abode of Viṣṇu, here known as Sundara or the Beautiful One, a rare treasure to those devoted to him, is the sacred pool that issued from the anklet of the conqueror of Bali, i.e., Trivikrama, and appears to have reached here almost without touching the *jaṭās*, the locks of Śiva :

*nityāvāsam vṛṣabham acalam sundarākhyasya viṣṇoḥ
pratyāsīdan sapadi vinamad bhāgadheyam natas syāḥ
yasyotsaṅge balivijayinas tasya mañjīravantam
pātho divyam paśupatijaṭāsparśasūnyam vibhāti*

(*Haṁsasandeśa* I, 49).

A drop on Śiva's locks, but immaculate

Nilakaṇṭha Dīkṣita describes the mighty stream of Gaṅgā, the celestial river, as a drop of water at the top of one of the matted locks (*jaṭās*) of Śiva, and also as the most holy river for the entire universe, thereby stressing the glory of Śiva by whose touch even this river assumes special holiness: *yatkeśāgravilagnam ambu jagatām tīrtham param pāvanam (Śivotkarṣamañjari 3)*. Gaṅgā is both purified by the touch of the Trinity itself, but what is more, she purifies everyone in the Trinity as well, which is more than can be said of any other stream.

Though she fills the ocean Gaṅgā is just a drop on Śiva's jaṭās

It would appear almost a wonder to know that the entire ocean, Sāgara that dried up, was filled again completely by the surging waters of the Gaṅgā. The heavenly river could fill even the ocean! There is an interesting story of how in days of yore, when the Devas and Asuras fought, the latter after harassing the former, hid themselves in the ocean, the waters of which were inaccessible to the

former. At the request of the celestials themselves, Agastya proceeded towards the mighty ocean which he sipped in a trice for the welfare of the world. It was now easy for the Devas to destroy the Asuras who could no more hide themselves. After the Asuras were overcome, there was no more need for the ocean to be kept dry. In fact it was essential that the ocean be filled. The Devas now approached Agastya to release the waters sipped by him, but since he had already digested the waters of the ocean, the question of release could not arise; now the celestials had no other choice but to request Brahmā to help them refill the ocean. Brahmā reassured them that the ocean would be filled in time when Bhagīratha, by his penance, brought down the heavenly river Gaṅgā to the earth and took her towards the ocean to purify the ashes of his ancestors that lay on its bed. He foretold that the waters of the Gaṅgā would fill the ocean and this is indeed what happened. It is no wonder at all that the waters of a single river could fill the ocean. It is symbolic. All rivers are symbolised by Gaṅgā and she is herself the celestial stream. At any rate the glory of Gaṅgā in mythology makes it no great problem for her to fill the ocean, when the force of her descent from heaven required the mightiest of the mighty celestials, Śiva himself, to hold her on his locks, lest there should be a complete devastation of the world by the force of her fall:

*mahatā kālayogena prakṛtim yāsyate'rṇavaḥ
jñātīṃśca kāraṇam kṛtvā mohārājo bhagīrathaḥ
pūrayiṣyati toyaughais sa nudram nidhim ambhasām*

(Mahābhārata 3, 106, 2-3).

The glory of Gaṅgā however, far exceeds that of the ocean as Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita admits. The ocean itself was filled by the abundant waters of the stream of Gaṅgā; yet this Gaṅgā was herself just a drop on the locks of Śiva. That very ocean, which Viṣṇu, who had earned great renown by successive incarnations as Varāha and Rāma, and who, as the former had dived in to rescue the Vedas, and as the latter built a bridge across to reach Laṅkā, was filled and enlarged by the waters of the mighty stream of the Gaṅgā. Yet she in her turn was just a drop on the jaṭās of Śiva:

*setum yatra nibadhya yatra vasudhām uddhṛtya magnām purā
vikhyāto madhusūdanas sa jaladhīr yatsrotasā pūritaḥ
sā jāhnavyapī yajjātātānuśikhālambāmbuleśāyitā
sa svāmī mama daivatam taditaro nāmnāpī nāmnāyate*

(Śivotkarṣamañjarī 6).

2. Consequences of Her Pride

Gaṅgā, proud and overbearing

Even though she was born the charming daughter of the snowclad Himālaya, and though her sanctity was such that mere thinking of her was enough to cleanse all sins, Gaṅgā was still a *kuṭilā* or crooked one. Nevertheless, legend has it that the gods carried her to Satyaloka to decide on offering her to Śiva. But poor Brahmā, even with his eight eyes, could not really gauge her and, noticing her wayward ways and overweening pride, dismissed the suggestion of the celestials to unite her with Śiva. When Gaṅgā, though a child, opened her mouth to have her say in the matter, Brahmā cursed her into assuming watery shape, i.e., the form of a stream. Taking even this in her stride, the daughter of Himālaya, with her waves lofty like those of the ocean, played about in the vicinity of Brahmā himself, who, alarmed at the fury and rage of her streams and eddies, created vast embankments to control her pride. It is no wonder that Gaṅgā's temperament led her to argue with Bhagīratha asking him how she could descend to the earth from heaven without devastating the universe itself. Even as she spoke to the supplicant Bhagīratha, whose attitude pleased her, she almost appeared to drown the entire universe by her words:

jagāda sadyo jagadaṇḍamaṇḍalam nimajjayantīva vacobhireva sū (Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa 3, 1).

'Even if I were to enter the netherworld,' said she, 'the entire globe of the universe would go to pieces like a frail dry gourd. Your desire is to acquire the undying fame of bringing me to the earth and to the netherworld to purify and carry your ancestors heavenward. But you overlook the tremendous sin that you commit by creating a deluge everywhere through me, resulting in the extermination of all living beings. How difficult was it and how wonderful the manner in which Brahmā created this vast universe by the great effort of his *yoga*! At one stroke, you desire to render this a mere memory in history, all by my descent on it. If through my deference to the word of Brahmā, who has allowed me to go with you, I put aside my natural compassion for all living beings and descend to the underworld, where would you be yourself to offer your respectful obsequies to your ancestors? My waves are not mere words, they are devastating in action.'

Show me someone to whom I can demonstrate the force of my current. It cannot be even before *vaḍavānala*, the oceanic fire, or even before Agastya, the sage who drank the ocean. Though I grieve to think of the devastation I would cause, I still rejoice that here I have a chance to give my waves full play, which I have long desired. If I suddenly enter Amarāvati, the glorious city of the celestials, would Indra be able again to see the face of his beloved Śacī, whom he lovingly paints with perfumed sandal? Would it either be possible for the earth, which cannot be flooded by even the deep and placid waters of the great ocean, to bear the overwhelming force of my waters?" Bhagīratha patiently listened to these proud words but again reiterated his desire to take her along with him, not in her anthropomorphic form, but as a stream, to purify and transport his ancestors to heaven. 'I am not asking you,' said he, 'to quench my thirst, there are many rivers for that. Nor even for water itself as such, there is rain for that. But I desire the water of your stream for purification.' Gaṅgā finally agreed and promised to appear before him whenever he wanted. And now Brahmā again helped Bhagīratha and assured him that Śiva was the only one who could receive the velocity of the descent of Gaṅgā's tremendous downpour. Indeed, it was Śiva the great God, a fraction of whose power destroyed the entire horde of celestials assembled at the sacrifice of Dakṣa, pleased with his devotion had blessed even Mukunda himself in the hoary past. By a mere smile he destroyed the dreaded Tripuras. From him originated the four Vedas themselves and in front of him the mystic syllable *Om* could unravel his glory. He is beyond the universe, and all celestials hail him with one voice. He adorns one half of his body with his own *vidyā* in the form of his beloved consort. He is the most auspicious, the immaculate, the omniscient, the eternal doer of good, the great Lord, who has the entire universe at his feet. His abode is the crystal-capped silvery mountain, the humble citizens of whose capital are the Lord of wealth and prosperity himself and his Yakṣa hosts, yet unrivalled in prosperity. He roams as a naked beggar with blades of grass, dhattūra and other flowers as decoration for his locks, rejecting only the alluringly sweet-smelling petals of *ketakī* as if it were a poisonous creeper. As Bhagīratha prayed to Śiva, engaging himself in deep penance, which terrified even the celestials themselves, he occasionally heard at the time of twilight the sound of Śiva's drum, deep and rumbling, like the roar of thunder at the end of the deluge. There also appeared before him for a moment a galaxy of celestials stupefied by the imposing sight of the *tāṇḍava* of Śiva, the Lord of Caṇḍī. Finally, Śiva himself graciously approached him and, to satisfy his desire, prepared himself to receive the heavenly stream. Gaṅgā came along with overweening pride. 'I pity

my father, the aged Lord of the mountain, and my younger sister Pārvatī who has a loving heart, but if I proceed with my endeavour to come down, what is Śiva to me and what is this silvery mountain? I could envelope them both. Oh Brahmā! I have stayed long in your abode and it is on that account that I would like to oblige you. I shall now, as a punishment to Śiva who cut off one of your heads, drown him deep in the netherworld, with my overwhelming waves enveloping the universe and swallowing up Śiva, reducing him to smithereens as it were, and mixing him up in my waters, so that pieces of his bones, like small bits of *śaṅkha* (conches and shells), may have to be fastidiously searched for by Nandi':

*sāvalepanipatanmadūrmibhissamplavaṅkabalīkṛto haras
saṅgataḥ payasi śaṅkhaśuktibhir nandinā nanu gaveśayiṣyate
(Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa 5, 7).*

'Does Śiva take my turbulent water to be somewhat like the Kālākūṭa poison that he once drank? Oh Brahmā! please even now desist from this request. I pity my sister who should not grieve for her Lord. If, however, out of compassion for the universe you would ask me not to ruin it, I shall simply teach a lesson to this one, Śiva, who is so vain as to think he could hold my water.' But Śiva just smiled. And the monstrous stream came down with unparalleled velocity, destroying the entire celestial neighbourhood, even frightening Sarasvatī in the mansion of her Lord's mouth, with a myriad celestials and heavenly sages all running helter skelter as the steeples of Indra's Vaijayanta palace crumbled and fell. With her monstrous waves shining forth from the abode of Brahmā himself up to the abode of Himālaya, and almost fondling her sister with them she entered the deep caverns in Śiva's locks, pushing out the skull of Brahmā himself, and thereby even the Brahmahatyā sin that Śiva had to encounter, and though, no doubt, purifying even Śiva as she could the entire universe, she just disappeared as a stream, and not a speck of her was seen anywhere else the moment she was caught and entrapped in Śiva's locks:

*tajjaṭāpaṭalakandarodarasvīkṛtās suranadīmahormayaḥ
leśatopi kila nālalakṣire satkriyā iva kṛtaghnagocarāḥ
(Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa 5, 9).*

And, lo and behold! Śiva's *jaṭās* looked fresh but wet and gleaming, with the serpents undisturbed, the moon unruffled, and the crest adornment of fresh flowers unaffected; only their perfume was increased by the sweet-smelling blossoms of the celestial trees washed in abundance onto Śiva's locks by the heavenly stream:

*akliṣṭapannagam ajarjaritendurekham avyastakāśakitavastaba-
kāvatamsam
śambhor adṛśyata śiras surasindhumuktadivyaḍrumaprasava-
saurabhasārasāndram (Gaṅgāvatarāṇa 5, 66).*

Gaṅgā's overweening pride is best seen in this vivid description of Gaṅgāvatarāṇa by Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita, where, not unlike Manmatha who boasted to Indra and the Devas that he could stir up and overcome even the great wielder of the bow, Pināka, Gaṅgā proclaimed how easily she could descend with tremendous force on Śiva's head and carry him down to the netherworld, pounding and reducing him to smithereens adding sarcastically that Nandi may have to search in vain for any trace of his bones. But her eventual fate reveals the excesses of her indiscretion. It is a vivid picture of Gaṅgā, immature, girlish, unacquainted with the superior power of Śiva, which has led to even great poets having a dig at her while describing lack of judgement. Bhartṛhari feels that those who are devoid of discrimination would encounter a sad fall in a myriad directions, giving the vivid example of Gaṅgā who, falling from heaven on to the head of Śiva, descended therefrom on a mountain top, from the height of which she ran down to the earth, finally to reach the sea, where commingling in that large mass of water, her own stream became insignificant and shed its identity, reducing her to no enviable state indeed:

*śiras sārvaṃ svargāt paśupatiśirastah kṣitidharam
mahādhṛāduttuṅgād avanīm avaneścāpi jaladhīm
adho gaṅgā seyam padam upagatā stokam athavā
vivekabhraṣṭānām bhavati vinipātas śatamukhaḥ*

(Bhartṛharisubhāṣita 1, 10).

Jagannātha, however, has a wonderful way of explaining why Gaṅgā who arose from the lotus feet of Viṣṇu, and found a home in the golden locks of Śiva, should descend in a deep fall to reach the netherworld itself. It is not, as in Bhartṛhari, who chooses to use Gaṅgā as an example of lack of discrimination, that leads to a bad fall. 'O mother!' addresses Jagannātha, 'your origin is on the immaculate lotus-tinged toenail of the Lord of the Lotus-princess, Śrī; your abode is in the palace composed of the locks of the opponent of Cupid: but all your activity beyond this is to liberate from sins and transport to heaven in immaculate form all those that are lost, having reached the lowest depths of degradation. O mother! is that fall of yours a fall at all, considering its purpose of self-sacrifice, which at once raises your personality to the greatest heights that even the celestials cannot hope to reach?'

*samutpattiḥ padmāramaṇapadapadmāmalanakhān-
nivāsaḥ kandarapapratibhatajaṭājūṭabhavane
athāyam vyāsaṅgo hatapatitanistōraṇavidhau
na kasmādutkarṣas tava janani jāgarti jagati (Gaṅgālaharī 21).*

And naturally he queries whether among the many rivers and streams running along the mountain slopes and adorning the broad plains there is any that has had the good fortune to mount up to and nestle in the locks of the Destroyer of the Tripuras, or any that has had the good fortune to wash the feet of the Lord of Śrī with the waters of her stream. How can any of these then hope to even approach in comparison the celestial river, even if poets would love to describe the rivers in hyperbole:

*nagebhyo yāntīnām kathaya taṭinīnām katamayā
purāṇām samhartus suradhuni kapardodhiruruhe
kayā vā śrībhartuḥ padakamalam akṣāli salilaiś
tulāleśo yasyām tava janani dīyeta kavibhiḥ (Gaṅgālaharī 22).*

The story of Gaṅgā's descent pleases the Manes and assures them a place in heaven

The happiest story narrated by the sage Viśvāmitra to the young boys Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa as they listened with rapt attention, was of the descent of Gaṅgā to the earth, first on Śiva's *jaṭā*, and therefrom released, her flow into Bindusaras, whence she multiplied herself into seven streams, Hlādinī, Pāvanī, Nalinī (eastward bound), Sucakṣu, Sitā, Sindhu (westward bound) and Alakanandā following the course of Bhagīratha to reach the ocean and the netherworld. This chapter in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the one specially chosen for recitation even today to entertain those invited to dine on the *śrāddha* day in any Hindu household. It is believed that listening to *Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa* from the *Rāmāyaṇa* purifies and assures the highest place in heaven even to the *Pitṛs* or the Manes. The ritual of reciting extracts from the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas* is fulfilled by the mere reading of the *Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa* chapter, even if more is not possible:

*dhanyam yaśasyam āyuṣyam putryam svargyam atīva ca
yas śrāvayati vipreṣu kṣatriyeṣvitarēṣu ca
prīyante pitaras tasya prīyante daivatāni ca
(Rāmāyaṇa 1, 44, 21-22).*

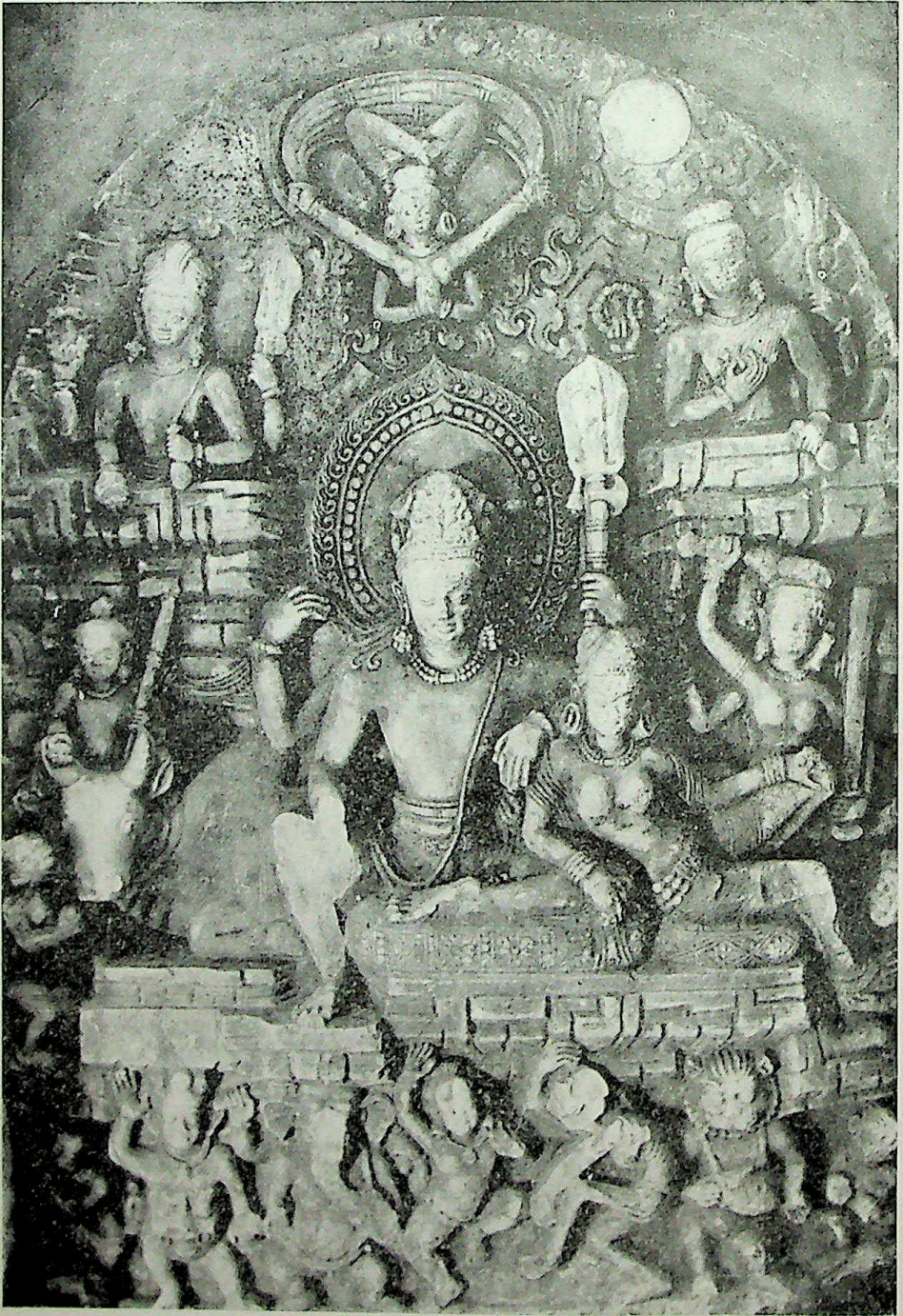


Fig. 3. Umāsaḥita Śiva receiving Gaṅgā on his locks, approaching in *Gaṅgā-vataraṇa karaṇa*, 10th century A.D., Nepal.

Gaṅgāvatarāṇa

Among the different *karāṇas* in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Gaṅgāvatarāṇa* is the last and most important. Gaṅgā's flowing onto the *jaṭās* of Śiva was such an event that the special manner in which she descended in anthropomorphic form created a *karāṇa* representation, very artistic and suggestive. Normally in all forms of Gaṅgādhara, Gaṅgā in mermaid fashion is made to approach from above, not head first, but in the normal way, letting herself down with hands clasped in adoration; but in *Gaṅgāvatarāṇa karāṇa* she is shown descending head first with her hands and legs in a position suggesting diving and swimming; she even suggests the stream itself which is most fascinating, especially in the case of a river. It is only in Nepal that this *Gaṅgāvatarāṇa* tradition is wonderfully preserved and associated with Śiva as Gaṅgādhara, iconographically a special form in this region (Fig. 3). Gaṅgā descends onto Śiva's locks in exactly the same pose as the *karāṇa* of that name described by Bharata and illustrated in the sculptural panels with incised labels from the text on the *gopura* at Chidambaram. The sculptor has chosen the fluttering garment, *uttariya*, of Gaṅgā to add movement and tempo to the action of the stream, furiously descending from heaven onto the locks of Śiva.



Fig. 4. Gaṅgādhara, close-up, suggesting the receiving of Gaṅgā on his locks by Śiva. Early Coḷa, 9th century A.D., Koḍumbāḷūr, Tamil Nadu.

Gaṅgā humbled into being a devotee

In sculpture, Gaṅgā is shown as a devotee with her hands folded in *añjali*, descending onto the *jaṭās* of Śiva, all her earlier pride lost, with no hope of fulfilling her earlier plans of coming down with a tremendous force to drown and scatter Śiva, reduced to smithereens, far down in the netherworld from his high state on the Himālayas. She is now perfectly conscious of his superiority, and is almost a *śaraṇārthīnī* to the great *śaraṇya*, Śiva. He just points two fingers to one *jaṭā* from among the myriads of locks on his head, significantly suggesting that now, like a drop of water, she would remain on it (Fig. 4). Most insignificant indeed is this drop, where a mighty stream that threatened to drown the universe is concerned. Gaṅgādharamūrti in this aspect is signified by Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita as humbling Gaṅgā's pride almost as a *samhāramūrti*, though he would not take away the life of the culprit stream. While he accepted her as one of his consorts, next to Pārvatī herself, he reduced her supreme ego and thereby her pride. That is why Nīlakaṇṭha Dikṣita puts on par, Madanāntaka, the form of Śiva that punished Madana who prided himself on being able to mortify the entire universe, Tripurāntaka who burnt the brazen cities, and Gaṅgādhara conceived as Gaṅgāśoṣanamūrti rather than the mild and gracious receiver of the stream. However all this, he maintains, was done by Śiva only to admonish these three and with no malice or rancour, as he nevertheless gave a fresh lease of life to Madana and admitted Gaṅgā to the high status of his own consort:

*gaṅgāmbhaḥpariśoṣaṇam smaramadocchedo jagadvāha ity-
ādyam nigrahavaśasam kalayate kaṇṭhādūparyeva yaḥ
(Śivotkarṣamañjarī 45).*



Fig. 5. Gaṅgā as cāmaradhārīnī, along with Gaurī, for Nāṭarāja dancing on bull. Pāla, 11th century A.D., Śankarbandhā, Bangla Desh.

3. Śiva's Consort

Gaṅgā as Cāmaradhārīṇī

In sculptures from Bangladesh of Śiva dancing on the bull, there is a peculiar representation not of Gaṅgā and Yamunā flanking Śiva as described by Kālidāsa in the *Kumārasambhava* in the line *mūrte ca gaṅgāyamune tadānīm sacāmare devam aseviṣātām*, but of Gaṅgā on one side on her *makara* and Pārvatī herself on her lion, gently swaying the *cāmara* for their Lord. It is here a peculiar but clear admission of the fact that Śiva also has two consorts like Viṣṇu or Brahmā, the former with Śrī and Sarasvatī in North Indian representations and Śrī and Bhūdevī in South Indian carvings, the latter with Sarasvatī and Sāvitṛī, the last only very occasional in sculptural representations as from the door lintel from Gaṅgārāmpur, Gaur, now in the Indian Museum. A clear mention of Śiva with two consorts, Pārvatī and Gaṅgā, is found in a Cambodian inscription, and there is mention also of a sculpture of Śiva with both his consorts flanking him, made in gold by a Cambodian king. Like Rājarājeśvarī, the consort of Śiva, attended by Śrī and Sarasvatī flanking her *caurīs* in hand, *sacāmararamāvāṇīsavayadakṣiṇasevitā*, Śiva as Naṭarāja has, in his two consorts, not only two witnesses of his dance, but two *cāmaradhārīṇīs*, Gaṅgā, exclusive of Yamunā in this case, and in the company of Pārvatī makes this all the more interesting (Fig. 5).



Fig. 6. Gaṅgā approaching Śiva as a bride, Gupta, Rajouna, Bihar.

Gaṅgā approaches Śiva as his bride

Gaṅgā, as she proceeds from one area to the other, gains experience. By the time she flows in all three areas, she is tremendously mature. She realises that it is her great good fortune to be the consort of the Lord of the universe. It is this Gaṅgā who approaches Śiva as a shy, coy bride in a remarkable Gupta sculpture from Rajouna, in Bihar (Fig. 6). She approaches Śiva on her vehicle, *makara*, not standing but very respectfully kneeling on the back of the crocodile, her hands demurely clasped in *añjali*, exactly as a bride would timidly approach her newly wedded lord, but yet as a princess with the royal umbrella held over her head by a maid; and Śiva graciously holds out one of his locks of hair as the place of her abode. Gaṅgā is here clearly depicted as a *nāyikā*, lovingly approaching her beloved one, and this is not merely *Gaṅgāvataraṇa* but *Gaṅgāpariṇaya* of Śiva. Gaṅgā is not shown here in mermaid form but in pure and complete anthropomorphic figure as she is usually depicted on door jambs. There is no other representation of Śiva as Gaṅgādhara receiving his bride graciously, except in this unique sculpture. Śiva, ever gracious towards his devotees, is equally gracious to the repentent Gaṅgā who comes to him with humility, and cannot refuse her protection where she seeks it.



Fig. 7. Gaṅgādhara appeasing Pārvatī, while receiving Gaṅgā on his locks, Early Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Gaṅgaikoṇḍaḷapuram, Tamil Nadu.

Gaṅgā as a co-wife with Pārvatī

This leads on first to Gaṅgā as one of Śiva's two consorts along with Pārvatī. While there is distinct displeasure on the part of Pārvatī in all Indian representations of Gaṅgādhara where Śiva receives Gaṅgā, it is just the opposite in Cambodia. Here, she is a happy co-wife along with Gaṅgā. How they both come together in great affection and regard is clearly represented in the Mebon pillar inscription of Rājendravarman (A.D. 952), which states that, abandoning the company of other gods, and with devotion and reverence, this king sought with a longing the blue-throated Śiva in exactly the same manner as Gaṅgā and Bhavānī:

*vihāya saṅgam paradevatāsu śraddhā ca bhaktis ca pare yadye
śrīkaṇṭham utkaṇṭhatayā prapanne gaṅgābhavānyāviva deva-
devam.*

Another inscribed pillar of Indravarman from Bakon, not only narrates how a sculpture of Śiva as the Lord of Umā and Gaṅgā, Umāgaṅgāpatiśvara, was established but also how lovingly and with mutual faith Gaṅgā and Umā embrace Śiva from either side. Indravarman established the sculpture Umāgaṅgāpatiśvara in the attitude of his being embraced on the hip by the delicate hands of Umā and Gaṅgā. An excellent sculpture from Bakon, though mutilated, depicts Śiva flanked by Umā and Gaṅgā embracing him:

*umāgaṅgābhujalatāsaṁśliṣṭajaghanasthalam
sa īśvaram sthāpitavān umāgaṅgāpatiśvaram.*

Another long inscription at Kapilapura describes Śiva in the company of Bhavānī and Jāhnavī, i.e., Umā and Gaṅgā, *bhavānījāhnavīyuktam*. This follows the tradition in Bengal where Umā and Gaṅgā flank Nāṭeśvara Śiva, even waving *caurīs* for him, of which the finest example from Sankarbandhā is to be found in the Dacca Museum.

The displeasure of Pārvatī who turns her face away from Śiva in vexation and anger at the prospect of a co-wife, Gaṅgā, is a favourite theme in art all over India. Kālidāsa hints at this when he describes how Gaṅgā, laughing through her foam almost tauntingly, and with a playfulness all her own at Umā's furrowed countenance, almost to further irritate her, caught the locks of Śiva with her hands, like waves, clutching at the crescent moon:

*gaurīvakrahrukūṭiracanām yā vihasyeva phenais
śambhoḥ keśagrahaṇam akarod indulagnormihastā
(Meghadūta i, 50).*

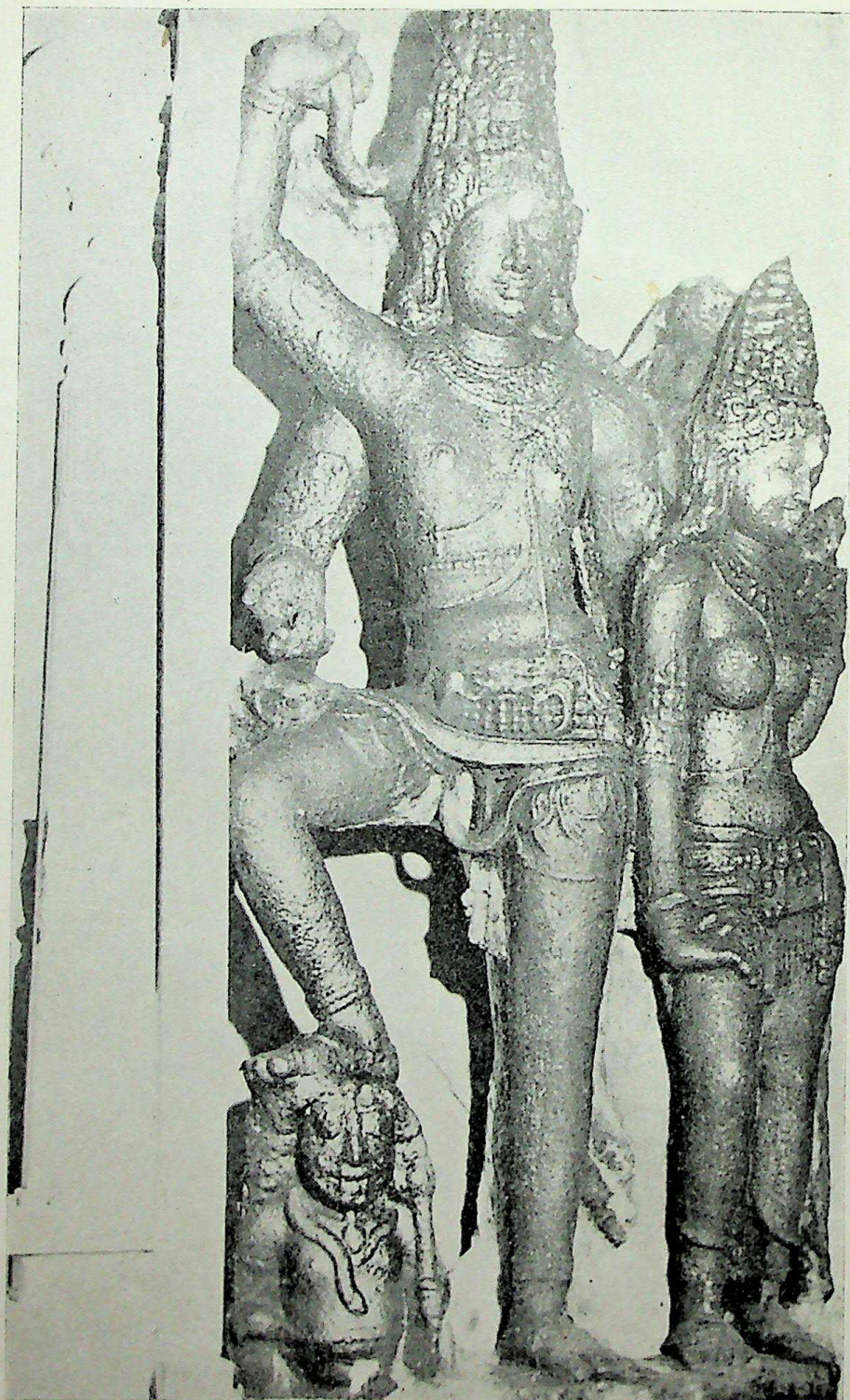


Fig. 8. Gaṅgādhara with Pārvatī vexed with her face turned away. Early Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Māyūram, Tamil Nadu.

The treatment of this subject starts very early, as in the Gaṅgādhara at Elephanta itself, Devī's face is tilted with her displeasure clearly indicated in her mien. It is all the more evident in still later sculptures as at Gaṅgaikondacolapuram where the great emperor Rājendra took pride in bringing Ganges water to his new capital and gave great prominence to this form of Śiva as Gaṅgādhara (Fig. 7). Pārvatī is so vexed at the prospect of being a co-wife that her face is turned away from even her most auspicious Lord (Fig. 8), Śiva, who, however, graciously appeases her with coaxing words and soft caressing of her chin and praise of her great beauty, unsurpassed by and impossible in any other.

This *anunaya* leads us to the other question of a *śaṭha* or a rogue who appeases his jealous wife after dallying with another and disappointing the former. It is this aspect of the lover that is referred to in a *Nāndi* verse of the *Mudrārākṣasa*, where Pārvatī searchingly questions Śiva who hides Gaṅgā in his matted locks and evades her questions with clever replies. 'Who is this blessed one on your head?' asks Pārvatī. 'It is Śaśikalā (the crescent moon),' quickly answers Śiva. Significantly, again Pārvatī questions, 'Is that her name?' and Śiva rebuts, 'It is no doubt the term for it; and how is it that though it is quite familiar you have forgotten it?' Pārvatī has no other recourse but to speak out almost bluntly, 'I am asking of a woman and not the moon.' But then, Śiva lovingly tries to wriggle out, 'Let Vijayā explain if you do not trust the moon.' The duplicity of Śiva in this strain in trying to hide the heavenly stream from Devī is the poet's lovely creation of an imaginary conversation between them:

*dhanyā keyam sthitā te śīrasi śaśikalā kim nu nāmaidat asyā
nāmaivāsyās tadetat paricitam apī te vismṛtam kasya hetoḥ
nārīm pṛcchāmi nendum kathayatu vijayā na pramāṇam
yadīndur*

*devyā nihnotum icchor iti surasaritam sāṭhyam avyād vibhor
vaḥ (Mudrārākṣasa I.1).*

The same idea of the wife's jealousy at the prospect of a co-wife, and the rush of anger that the husband tries to appease is also clearly manifest in the opening verse of the Tiruvālaṅgāḍu plates, where Śiva, the wearer of Gaṅgā on his locks, is this time unnecessarily suspected by Pārvatī who mistakes her own image reflected in the ruby on the hood of the serpent ornament and spurns him though he most lovingly is at her feet, desiring her close embrace:

*svasti śrīkaṇṭhakaṇṭhābharaṇabhujagarāṇmūrdhni māṇikya-
madhye
dṛṣṭvātmīyām salajjā pratikṛtim aparām aṅganām śaṅkamānā*

*aśleṣālolacittam kṛtacaraṇanatiprārthanam vo bhavānī
diśyāt paśyantyadhīram nījapatim anīṣam serṣyam ardhekṣa-
ṇēna* (South Indian Inscriptions 3, p. 383).

Release of Gaṅgā in Gaṅgāvisarjanamūrti

Śiva's matted locks are a large cauldron, in which Gaṅgā, caught with all the fury of her mighty waves could only lash them from side to side, creating the effect of a dance of waters on the dancing *jaṭās* in the swirling movement of the supreme dancer Naṭarāja:

*jaṭākaṭāhasambhramabhramannilīmpanīrjharī
vilolavīcivallarī virājamānamūrdhani*

The swirling movement of Śiva's head in *tāṇḍava* releases Gaṅgā from the tips of the *jaṭā*, creating an impression of the heavenly river issuing from the *daṇḍapāda* of Viṣṇu in his incarnation as Trivikrama:

*līlāvadhūtaśirasosya valajjaṭāgraniṣyandisāndrasalilokṣitakoṭi-
bhāgāt
uccaṇḍatāṇḍavarasasya vinirjagāma mandākinī madhuripor iva
daṇḍapādāt* (Haraviṣaya 2, 49).

The ocean is not only swollen by the waters of the Gaṅgā as described by Venkaṭanātha who fancies them not only pure and white like the moonlight flowing with the intent of increasing the ocean from the clear sky from the foot of Viṣṇu, but tinged on all sides and flowing in different directions, giving up its red colour by association with the Śoṇa river, having absorbed the dark waters of the Yamunā, the daughter of the sun:

*viśodhitāt sāgaravṛddhihetor viśvaṇmukhī viṣṇupadāt sarantī
tamomayīm sūryasutām nigūrya jyotsnānadī śoṇam api vyamuñ-
cat* (Yādavābhyaṇḍaya 2, 70).

Like the moon who gladdens the ocean by swelling her abundant waters, Gaṅgā also swells the ocean as the poets have often described. It is the same idea that occurs in Maṅkha's poem, where he describes the fall of Ganges water shaken during his dance, from the locks of the moon-crested Śiva, and the misting over of moon stones with the effect of the lunar rays that swell the ocean and magnify the volume of the heavenly stream:

*sāndhyatāṇḍavavilāsasamsaraccandraśekharaśivassarijjalaiḥ
pūryamāṇa iva nīradhīr dadhe vṛddhim indudṛśadambubhis saha
(Śrīkaṇṭhacarita 10, 23).*

Could Yamunā also be a co-wife of Gaṅgā?

Not satisfied with one disappointment for Pārvatī in the shape of Gaṅgā taken on the locks of Śiva as a petted and fondled and almost zealously guarded bride, Ratnākara describes the supposed presence of Yamunā also as an additional cause for vexation, but this time the quarrel is almost between the two streams themselves, Pārvatī not being part of the squabble. The poet feels that the tinge of blue on Śiva's throat is the embrace on the neck of the blue stream of Yamunā, in an attempt to assert her right to an equal place in the Lord's affection like Gaṅgā herself, bringing in the jealousy of another co-wife to disturb the already ruffled domestic peace:

*yasyānūrāgavaśatas sphuṭakālakūṭacchāyācchalena kṛtakeṭika-
cāvamardam*

īrṣyānubandhakaluṣam prasamīkṣya gaṅgām

ālīngito yamunayeva vibhāti kaṇṭhaḥ (Haraviṣaya 1, 39).



Fig. 9. Close up Gaṅgā on the *jaṭās* of Natarāja, Early Coḷa, 11th century, A.D.

4. Adornment of Śiva

Gaṅgā turns a dancer

The tāṇḍava of Śiva is so contagious that even the moon on his locks joins in. No wonder that with all her waves, Gaṅgā herself dances (Fig. 9). In her dance Gaṅgā herself looks like a *naṭī* or a danseuse imitating the dance of Śiva himself with her upsurging waves, the waters of which destroy all sins and look like the hoods of the serpent, Śeṣa, bright in a flood of moonlight or like the tall peaks of the snow-clad Himālayas moving in violent action, but especially resembling the arms of Śiva spread out and thrown up in the ecstasy of the tāṇḍava dance. This is how an inscription of Vidyādhara Bhañjadeva would have it:

*śeṣāher iva ye phanāḥ pravilasantyudbhāsvarendutviṣaḥ
prāleyācalaśṛṅgakoṭaya iva tvaṅganti yetyunnatāḥ
nṛtātāṭopavighaṭṭitā iva bhujā rājanti ye śāmbhavās
te sarvāghavighaṭṭinas surasaritto yormayaḥ pāntu vaḥ*

(*Epigraphia Indica* IX, p. 275).

The poet Trilocanācārya accounts for the excellence of Gaṅgā as a great dancer by her close association with Mahānaṭa and compares his own gush of poetry to the sweet sound of the anklets of a divine dancer, particularly to the flow of the heavenly river herself:

*mahānaṭajaṭācchaṭānaṭadamandamandākinī
kalakvaṇṭitakaṇkaṇavrajaviṇṇmbhivāggumbhanaḥ
kaviḥ kavikulodbhavo bhuvanabhavyadivyaodayas
śivāgamaviśārado jayati śārādāvallabhaḥ*

(*Epigraphia Indica* III, p. 63).

Jagannātha Paṇḍita imagines a very interesting picture of the dancing Gaṅgā. He fancies how her moving waves indicate the graceful movement of the myriad hands of a great goddess who has chosen a wonderful golden stage on the golden locks of dancing Śiva, who is himself celebrating his victory over the Tripuras, and the sound of the stream of Gaṅgā, deep and rumbling as it enters the caverns in Śiva's *jaṭās*, produces the noble note of the *ḍamaru* to serve as the

rhythmic echo of the dance drum, almost creating a new *tāṇḍava* by the celestial stream in the wake of Śiva's more famous one:

*pradoṣāntarnṛtyatpuramathanaliloddhṛtajatā-
taṭābhogaprenkhallaharibhujasamtānavidhutih
bilakrīḍakroḍājjaḷaḍamaruḍāmkārasubhagas
tirodhattām tāpam tridaśataṭinītāṇḍavavidhiḥ*

(Gaṅgālaharī 38).

Elsewhere he very significantly fancies that Gaṅgā's dance, expressed through her waves suddenly shooting up and spurting, is not without reason. Śiva, passionately fond of the game of dice, which he usually plays with his beloved one, Pārvatī, stakes his precious objects like the snake, the hides of the lion and elephant, his own troops of impish *pramathas*, his necklace of *rudrākṣa* beads, even his vehicle, the lofty Nandi bull and his charming crest jewel, the crescent moon, nearly exhausting all his resources. Having lost them all, but still unabated in his ardour for the game, he stakes himself and there arises a happy moment for the daughter of Himavān, Pārvatī, to softly smile significantly, and look with a twinkle in her eye at her co-wife perched on the golden locks of Śiva, almost as if to say 'Now I have you in my hands,' whereat Gaṅgā wakes up to avert the calamity by throwing her waves up high reminding Śiva of his greater, more fascinating pastime, *tāṇḍava*, the dance of ecstasy, almost calling him to leave the game of dice and enjoy his *tāṇḍava* dance by commencing the movement of his limbs in response to the movement of Gaṅgā's waves:

*dyūte nāgendrakṛttipramathagaṇamañīśreṇinandīndumukhyam
sarvasvam hārayitvā svam atha purabhidi drāk paṇīkartukāme
sākūtam haimavatyā mṛdulahasitayā vīkṣitāyās tavāmba
vyālolollāsivalgallahariṇataghaṭītāṇḍavam naḥ punātū*

(Gaṅgālaharī 51).

Gaṅgā a backdrop for Śiva's dance

Even as Gaṅgā echoes the dance movement of Śiva himself in his *aṅgahāras*, *karaṇas* and the tossing of the head, the river flows out to form a backdrop for his dance:

*vikṣiptabāhunivahasya vihasya dikṣu tasyāṅgahāraṇakrama-
kampimūrdhnaḥ
agrātīpātīsalilā surasindhur āpa chīnāmśukojjvalatiraskariṇī-
vilāsam* (Haraviṇaya 2, 27).

Gaṅgā for Śiva's āhārya

Gaṅgā serves in every way to enhance the beauty of Śiva particularly in his *āhārya abhīnaya*, as his choice of the heavenly river as an adornment for his *jaṭās* is only indicative of his great taste and discrimination. If Mammata feels that the beauty of the female breast is best perceived when it is half hidden by a veil, the *jaṭā* of Śiva is of such great natural beauty that it is appreciated better when it has as a thin veil, the stream of the Gaṅgā. The heavenly river, with her mass of water fills the sky, shakes the sun and other planets by her velocity, derides the ocean with her wealth of waves and white as the moon acts as a graceful veil for the crest, fast bound by graceful tresses, of the moon-crested lord:

*vegoddhūtāryamādīgrahagaganatalam vyaśnuvānā jalaughair
nyakkurvāṇā samudrān lṣayavalitajalān ūrmimālāsahasraiḥ
deyād abhyarthitam vas śāśadharadhavalasvardhunī
candramauler
maulau līlām vahantī sphuṭavikaṭajajāṭābandhane cīrikāyāḥ*
(Epigraphia Indica II, p. 120).

Gaṅgā, a flower garland or even a silken turban for Śiva

The immense power of Śiva whose dance shakes the world, is also suggested by vividly portraying the sudden transformation of the forceful stream of Gaṅgā into the speck of a flower on his *jaṭās* — Gaṅgā, whose force pulled the planets, the sun and the moon, tearing asunder the quarters, putting to shame the pride of the waters of the deluge in their monstrous surging waves — losing her individuality the moment she touched Śiva's *jaṭās*, where she immediately assumes the charming position of a flower for his matted hair:

*vegākṛṣṭagraharaviśaśivyaśnuvānam digantān
nyakkurvāṇam pralayapayasām ūrmibhaṅgāvalepam
muktākāram hara tava jaṭābaddhasamsparsi sadyo
jajñe cūḍākusumasubhagam vāri bhāgīrathīyam*
(Anāmayaṣtotram 13).



Fig. 10. Close up of Gaṅgā as a garland on Naṭarāja's locks.
Early Coḷa, 10th century A.D., Taṇḍamtoṭṭam, Tamil Nadu.

The lovely stream of Gaṅgā is fancied as resplendent as a garland of *mālatī* flowers on the head of Śiva (Fig. 10) making him look almost a dandy, a *śṛṅgārī*:

*devaḥ pāyat sa vaś śrīmān śṛṅgārī girijāpriyaḥ
yasya gaṅgā jaṭājūṭe mālatīmālikāyate*

(*Epigraphia Indica* XXXII, p. 137).

Bāṇa is undoubtedly the inspirer of this thought as he describes the white stream of Gaṅgā as a *mālatīmālā*, a garland of *mālatī* flowers adorning Śiva's head:

andhakamathanamaulīmālatīmālikām (*Harṣacarita* I, p. 7).

Bāṇa's fancy does not stop here. He even imagines that Gaṅgā settled on Śiva's head is like a silken turban:

amśukoṣṇīṣapattikām iva sumeruṇṛpasya (*Harṣacarita* I, p. 8).

Halāyudha feels exactly like Bāṇa with the celestial stream trailing on Śiva's crest like a garland of *mālatī* flowers:

maulau lagnā tridaśataṭinī mālatīmālikeva

(*Epigraphia Indica* XXV, p. 176).

Gaṅgā, a royal attribute, cāmara or umbrella

Gaṅgā is also the *cāmara*, insignia of royalty for Śiva whose golden locks are as a crown with the hoods of the serpent acting as an umbrella on top. The moon rather is Dvijarāja, a king, and he sits on the golden throne of Śiva's *jaṭās* with the waves of the *caurī* provided through the spray of the Gaṅgā, the white snake garland with uplifted hoods serving as an umbrella over him:

*yatsimhāsanam īśvarasya kanakaprāyam jaṭāmaṇḍalam
gaṅgāsīkaramaṇjarīparikarair yaccāmaraprakriyā
svetotphullaphaṇāñcalas śivaśirassandānadāmoraḡas
chattram yasya jayatyāśavacaramo rājā śuddhādīdhitih*

(*Epigraphia Indica* I, p. 307).

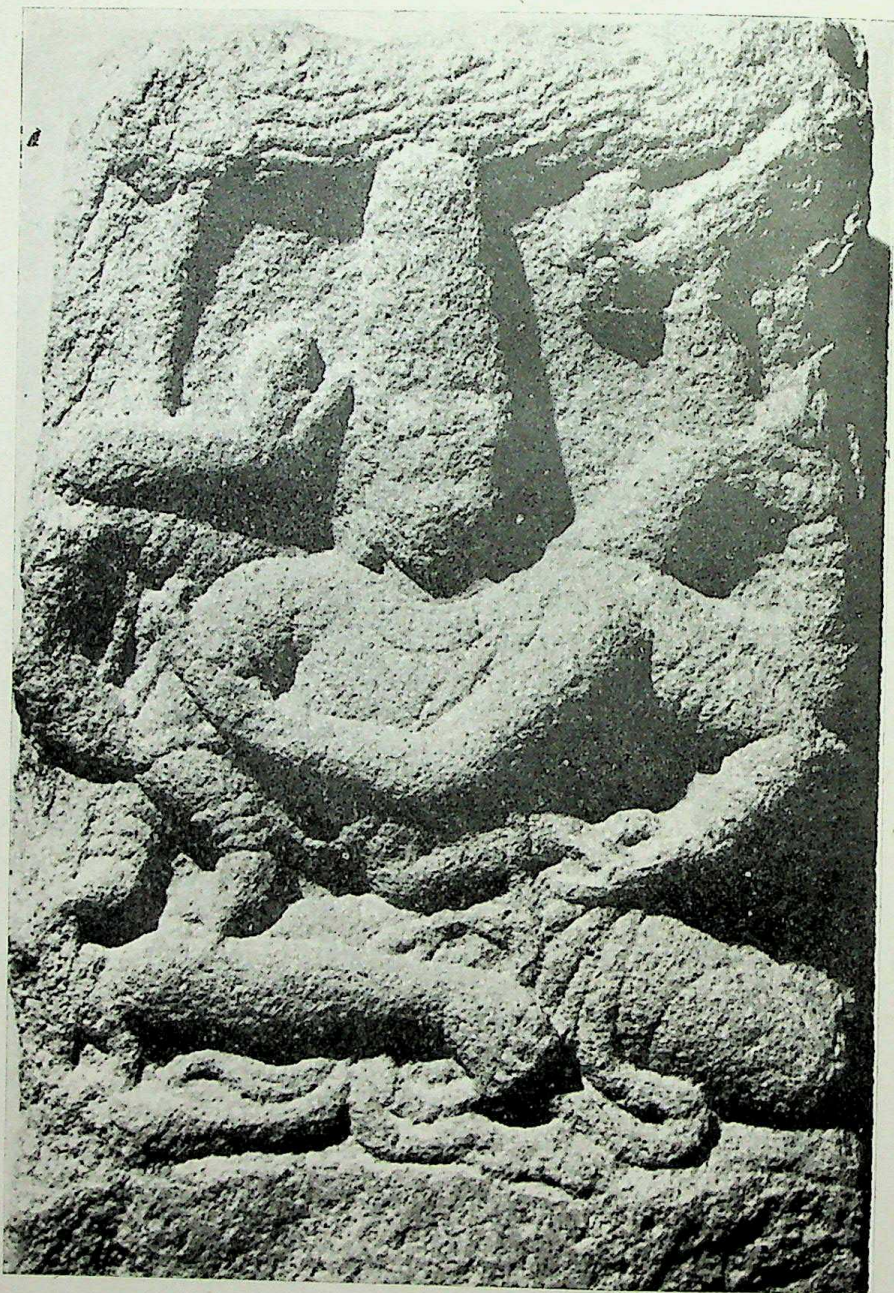


Fig. 11. Gaṅgā as an umbrella or *caurī* or canopy above Śiva, Pallava, 7th century A.D., Kāñcīpuram, Tamil Nadu, National Museum.

The Ganges adorning Śiva's head is conceived almost as a royal attribute since he is an emperor among dancers. The bound up crown of Śiva's *jaṭās* is a treasure-house of all prosperity and auspiciousness, in which the rollicking waters of the heavenly stream, Gaṅgā, appear as a white parasol, held up by a gust from the open mouth of the terrifying Lord of snakes, with hoods expanded by the pain of being drawn into a tight knot:

*pāyād vas sa samastamaṅgalanidhis sambhor jaṭājūṭako
yasmin lolalasaddyumaṇḍalagalanmandākinīvāribhiḥ
gāḍhagranthini pīḍitoragapatiprasphārāphullatphaṇā
bhīmavyāvṛtavaktramārutadhṛtais śvetātapatrāyitam*

(*Epigraphia Indica* I, p. 254).

A Pallava sculpture of Śiva now in the National Museum, New Delhi, shows him as Ālīḍhaṇṭtamūrti, dancing almost seated in the *ālīḍha* posture, not only as the great dancer, *mahānaṭa*, dancing the celebration of triumph over the Tripuras, but also as the master who inspires others to dance (Fig. 11). Devī usually dances with Śiva, and Kālī even challenged him, though she was ultimately defeated. Even Gaṅgā on the locks of Śiva turns a dancer, and in her enthusiasm throws up her wavy arms to simulate the multi-armed dancer, her Lord. In her stream form, dancing above the *jaṭās* of Śiva she forms a canopy, not unlike a white silken umbrella, held over that monarch among dancers, Naṭarāja. The stream itself wonderfully presents the picture of a backdrop for the great dancer, as Ratnākara in his *Haraviṣaya* would have it, or a *mālya* or richly woven garland of *mālatī* flowers as Bāṇa would have it. It is all these suggestions that are delightfully presented in the fluttering banner-like stream of Gaṅgā represented on top of the panel above Śiva's *jaṭās* in an undulating wavy line giving a picture of the billows of the celestial river.

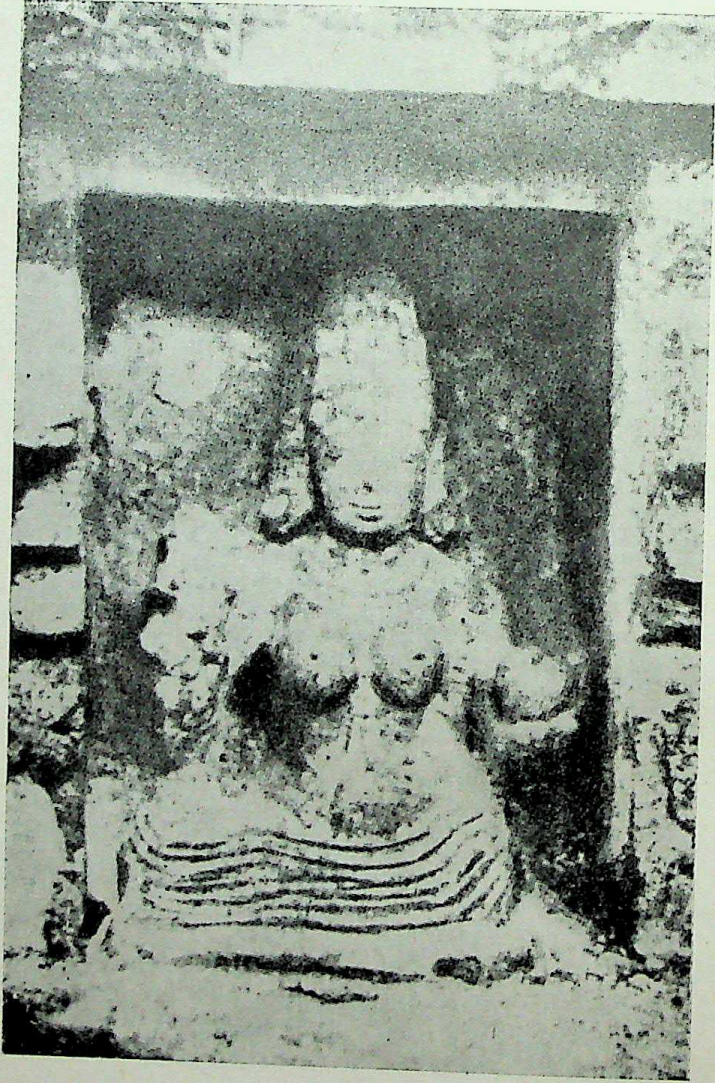


Fig. 12. Gaṅgā with a stream as her lower part, late Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Dārāsuraṃ, Tamil Nadu.

5. Gaṅgā's Many Forms

Gaṅgā is elusive of form

Gaṅgā is elusive of form and depicted usually as a mermaid on Śiva's *jaṭās* as he dances, her body below the waist undefined and almost formless, like a tapering, wavy mass (Fig. 12). Bāṇa imagines that the lower part of Gaṅgā suggests the disarray of her limbs as a result of her fall on Śiva's head:

parameśvarottamāṅgapātadurlalitāṅgām gaṅgām iva
(*Harṣacarita* VIII, p. 77).

But the meandering stream of Gaṅgā is so elusive of form, that she creates a doubt in the minds of even the celestials, who find it as difficult to comprehend her physical form as her innate power to almost drown Śiva. The stream of Gaṅgā, with lovely tortuous waves meandering on Śiva's head, create doubts in the minds of the celestials as to whether they are lily garlands, digits of the moon, the sprouts of deeds of merit, the sloughs of snakes, or ashes falling from Śiva:

kim mālāḥ kumudasya kim śasikalāḥ kim dharmakarmāṅkurāḥ
kim vā kaṇṇukikaṇṇukāḥ kim atha vā bhūtyudagamā bhāntyamī
ittham nākavitarkitās śivaśirassaṅcārīnākāpagā-
riṅgadvalgutarāṅgabhaṅgitatayaḥ puṇyaprapāḥ pāntu vaḥ
(*Epigraphia Indica* II, p. 10 and *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* IV, p. 314).

Gaṅgā, kind-hearted rasamayadevī

Gaṅgā is a *rasamayadevī*, tender at heart in her sympathy for all, particularly the suffering. She is one with Devī, Pārvatī herself, though both are daughters of the hard, rocky mountain, Himālaya. The wonder is that both melt like snow or butter and are invariably kind. If the line from the verse describing the eye that destroyed Cupid and rejuvenated him again — *ḍrśā dagdham manasijam ḍrśai-vonmīlayanti yāḥ* — refers to the eye of Śiva and the eye of Devī, it also refers to the eye of Gaṅgā. Ratnākara in any case specially supports this, as he is convinced that the kind-hearted stream that purifies and saves millions on earth, cannot be different even in the case of the most erring; and Manmatha only helped the charm of Devī and even that of Gaṅgā to be appreciated by the only one who could appreciate it, their Lord Śiva himself, and lost his life therefore.

The Ganges stream on Śiva's head appearing like the moon melting and dripping on the fire, suggests the extinguishing of the flame of the third eye, in which act the feminine aspect of Devī, rejuvenating, by her tenderness, grace and spiritual beauty, the potency of Cupid, re-assures his existence, as is elsewhere also closely indicated by Ratnākara:

*mandākinī śirasi maulikapālapaṭṭasamghaṭṭajarjaratarāṅga-
ghaṭā vibhāti
yasyordhvanetraśikhiviplutacandrakhaṇḍa viṣyandamānaśisīrā-
mṛtanirjharaśrīḥ (Haraviṇaya 1, 38).*

Gaṅgā, a pratyakṣa or visible form of Śiva

Abhinavagupta following Kālidāsa has accorded the highest place to Gaṅgā as one of the *pratyakṣamūrti* or perceivable forms of Śiva. He equates the element of water not with its mightier receptacle, the ocean, but with the stream of the Gaṅgā which has, as many poets have elsewhere described, filled the ocean itself and widened it. In describing the *aṣṭamūrti* aspect, Abhinavagupta in his commentary on Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* specially describes Gaṅgā who dances on Śiva's *jaṭās* as his liquid form, *jalamayamūrti*. Abhinavagupta devotedly invokes Devī herself, also including Gaṅgā, by making her *sarasā*, composed of stream and the gush of compassion, the aquatic form of her Lord, Śiva himself, as she is the tender creeper springing from the seed-source of Brahmā who is the maker or the creator of the entire world drama in all its activity:

*samsāranāṭyajanādhātṛbījalatājūṣm
jalāmūrtim śivām patyus sarasām paryupāsmahe*

(Abhinavabhāratī on *Nāṭyaśāstra* II.1).

This closely follows Kālidāsa, who describes Gaṅgā as the aquatic form of Śambhu: *śambhor ambumayī mūrtis saiva devī surāpagā* (*Kumārasambhava* X, 26). The same idea is given in epigraphical literature also, as in the descriptions of the *aṣṭamūrti* of Śiva. The likeness of Gaṅgā with the aquatic form of Śiva is clear in the expression, *sarūpām*. The wonder is that Śiva and Gaṅgā being the same, Śiva still has an existence separate from Gaṅgā, whom he holds on his head, and this is the wonder the poet also experiences. Not only that, but including Devī who has her own separate existence as part of himself, Śiva has a third on his head, which makes for rapid ripples on the hitherto unruffled surface of his pleasant lake of family life. Śiva the highest, beyond whom nothing exists, is yet so tolerant

as to allow a separate existence for Gaṅgā that could well create disruption in the house with the quarreling among the co-wives, Gaṅgā and Gaurī:

*viyad vāyur vahnir jalam avanir indur dinakaras
cidādhāras ceti tribhuvanam idam yanmayam abhūt
sa vas śreyo deyāt paramasuranāthas suranādīm
sarūpām bibhrāṇas śīraśi girijākṣepaviṣayaḥ*
(*Historical Inscriptions of Gujarat, Caṇḍukya*, p. 104 and *Epi-
graphia Indica* II, p. 440).

But this has been expressed elsewhere as the highest expediency on the part of Śiva who, though he is all powerful, and could reduce the universe to ashes, graciously chooses to keep the moon on his head and Pārvatī and Gaṅgā around him, the one looking with extreme displeasure at the other. This is an example of his profound knowledge of political expediency — *rājanīti*. Kavirāja has a wonderful description of this exercise of a *rājanīti* by Śiva who allows the moon, the mountain-born Pārvatī and Gaṅgā around him though, in his infinite power, he could stomach the deadly *kālakūṭa* poison, burn Kāma on the spot and transform the doomsday blaze into his luminous third eye:

*jīrṇepyutkatakālakūṭakavale dagdhe haṭhān manmathe
nīte bhāsurabhālanetratanutām kalpāntadāvānāle
yas śaktyā samalankṛtopi śaśinam śrīśailajām svardhunīm
dhatte kautukarājanītinipuṇaḥ pāyāt sa vas śaṅkaraḥ*
(*Subhāṣitakośa* IV, 41).

Gaṅgā is also most indicative of one of the principal forms of Śiva, and in himself, Śiva along with this, blends not only one iconographic form, but several almost simultaneously. In his Naṭarāja aspect, it is very interesting to see a blending of certain features of the deity's other iconographic forms. Gaṅgā on his *jaṭā*, nestling as a mermaid, recalls Gaṅgādhara while the prominent moon, occasionally shown on the *jaṭā*, proclaims his aspect as Candrasekhara. The ear ornament, different on either lobe or present only on one when it is a spiral, usual as feminine adornment, suggests the eternal Ardhanārīśvara. A special and noteworthy feature in the case of Naṭarāja is the decoration of his *jaṭās* with peacock feathers, at once recalling the Kirāta theme, in which form Śiva appears before Arjuna,



Fig. 13. Natarāja with Gaṅgā on his *jaṭās*. Early Coḷa, 11th century A.D., Art Gallery, Tañjāvūr, Tamil Nadu.

Gaṅgā fondly approaches Śiva, then recedes in fear

Gaṅgā, as the sculptor has fashioned and represented her on the *jaṭās* of Śiva, has sometimes been conceived as a fond companion in life, conscious of the overpowering personality of her Lord, but yet anxious to whisper in his ears, unheard by Pārvatī, her whisper being more her amazement (Fig. 13). In a beautiful metal figure of Naṭarāja at Śīyāli there is clearly indicated the inspiration of a tradition of faith and devotion of the baby saint Tirujñānasambanda associated with this village. The figure of Gaṅgā, here almost crawling on the *jaṭā* of Śiva appears to whisper in the ear of her Lord her devotional hymns, as she watches his dance and appreciates it as the most elegant.

On the other hand, in another image also in metal from Puṅganūr, now in the Madras Museum, Gaṅgā is depicted as moving away towards the end of the *jaṭā*, almost afraid of the violent swirl of Śiva's locks as he dances his *tāṇḍava*. This cannot but recall another sculpture, that of Gajāntaka from Dārāsura, where even according to the indication of the *dhyāna* text itself, the goddess Pārvatī herself, with the child Skanda on her hip, is moving away in fear, so to speak, at the violent dance of her Lord.

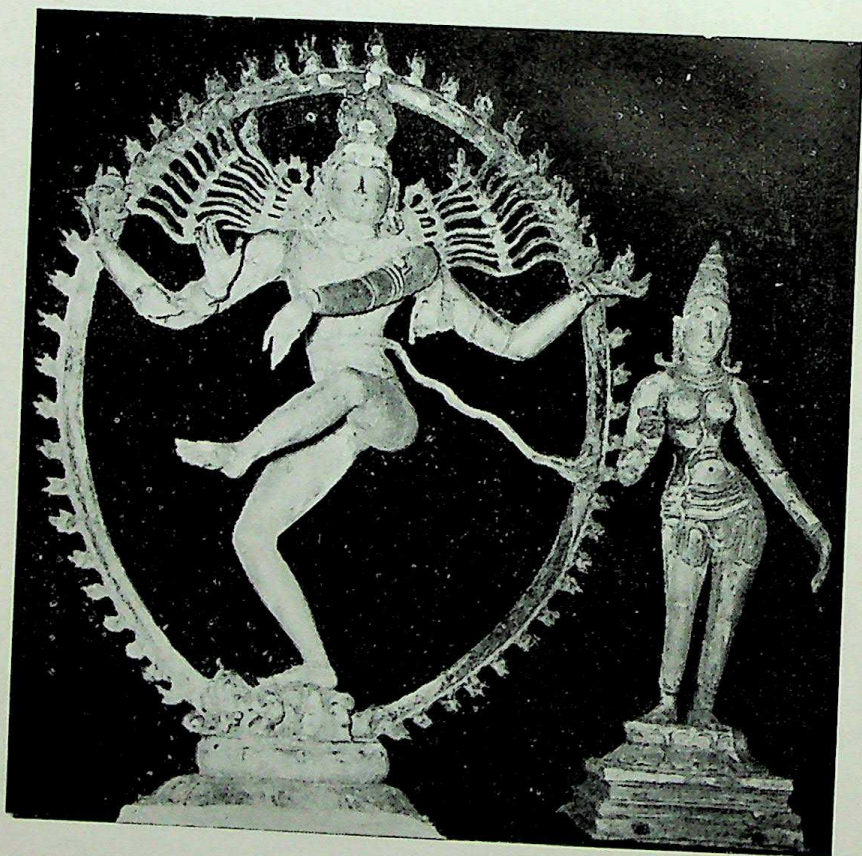
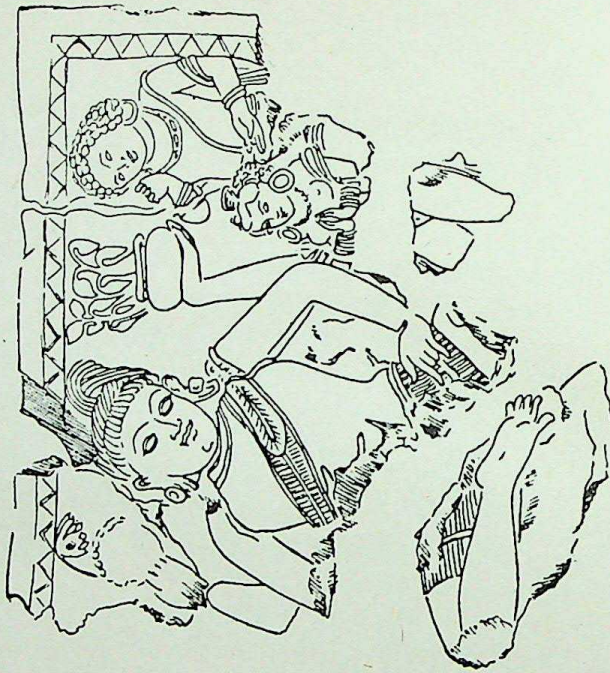


Fig. 14. Wavy pattern of *jaṭās* for Natarāja, late Coḷa, 12th century A. D.

Gaṅgā and the jaṭās

In the arrangement of Śiva's hair itself, the sculptor has ever made it an important point not to loosen the entire bundle of locks and allow them to swirl all around, nor is the whole dressed in *makuta* fashion, as is normal in all other forms except that of Nāṭeśa. A portion of the *jaṭās* is skillfully arranged as a *makuta*, while the rest is allowed to fall loosely on the shoulders or back or to spread out on either side laterally, almost creating an impression of waves. This is very important as the wavy *jaṭās* along with the moving reptiles with flowers dotted on them, create an illusion of the heavenly river as a fluttering silken flag. Are they the undulating waves of the heavenly stream? The wavy line so charmingly manipulated by the artist is certainly suggestive of the *taraṅga* or wave flowing in and out, creating a sequence of undulations that not only suggest beauty but also scintillating life. Beauty is never indolent, it is dynamic. Waves never move singly, but in quick succession and create a series of charming, rolling undulations. So too, the curly hair in *taraṅga* fashion. In fact the word *taraṅga* itself means wavy. The suggestion is that the *jaṭās* of Śiva that whirl all around and undulate in wavy patterns assume the form of streams moving rapidly in eddy and whirlpool, now and again changing their course if necessary, to create serpentine configurations in their flow, thereby adding charm to a combination of identical patterns of curves. Visually, Gaṅgā, *bhujāṅga* and *taraṅga* combine and merge for a common effect (Fig. 14), a dazzling net of flowers on a fast-moving stream running in all directions and forming, as already remarked, a backdrop for the Mahānāṭa, the great dancer, Śiva.



Figs. 15 & 15a Gaṅgā, compassionate, and purifier of thought, beside Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Ahicchabhā, Uttar Pradesh.

6. Gaṅgā, Purifier

Gaṅgā purifies thought and expression

In a terracotta from Ahicchatrā representing Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrti, the form more favoured in the South, (in North India, Lakulīśa generally takes the place of Dakṣiṇāmūrti) there is a beautiful representation of Gaṅgā standing beside Śiva the Teacher (Figs. 15 and 15a). As the expounder of the highest philosophy and thought, Śiva wears *vastra yajñopavīta* and is seated under the Banyan tree, symbolic of expanse and shelter. It is vast knowledge that assures a cool shade from the burning glare of all illusory *tāpa*, and Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrti never has Devī beside him. He is represented in this aspect almost as an ascetic, but this is only confined to Medhā, Jñāna — or Yoga-dakṣiṇāmūrti. It is only Gaṅgā whose presence is suggestive of purification who can stand beside him. There is an ancient belief in India that the immaculate waters of knowledge wash away the impurities of ignorance. The prayer to Pāṇini makes this clear:

*yena dhautā girāḥ puṁsām vimalais śabdavārībhiḥ
tamas cājñānājam bhinnam tasmai pāṇinaye namaḥ*

Śiva himself as the great Teacher taught Pāṇini the essence of the science of language, and in his turn Pāṇini purified speech itself. Gaṅgā's presence indicates how immaculate the divine stream is and how she removes all dross and renders pure even the thoughts and expressions of Ṛṣis who symbolise all created beings, celestial or terrestrial. Here again the presence of Gaṅgā is significant.

Gaṅgā, the only purifier in Kali

The efficacy of Gaṅgā is clearly stated in the *Mahābhārata*. Bathing anywhere in the Gaṅgā is as good as setting foot on the holy soil of Kurukṣetra. There is a special sanctity, however, in bathing at Kanakhala and Prayāga. But the purity of Gaṅgā is of special importance because she is the one holy stream, efficacious even in Kali-yuga which is rampant with sin and folly. In the golden age or Kṛta-yuga, there is nothing which is unholy and nothing that requires purification and every place is a *tīrtha*, but in Tretā, the silver age, Puṣkara in Rājasthān is the sacred spot that removes all sins. In Dvāpara or the Copper Age, Kurukṣetra is holy; but in the dark, iron age of Kali, it is Gaṅgā, the river from heaven, who purifies all.

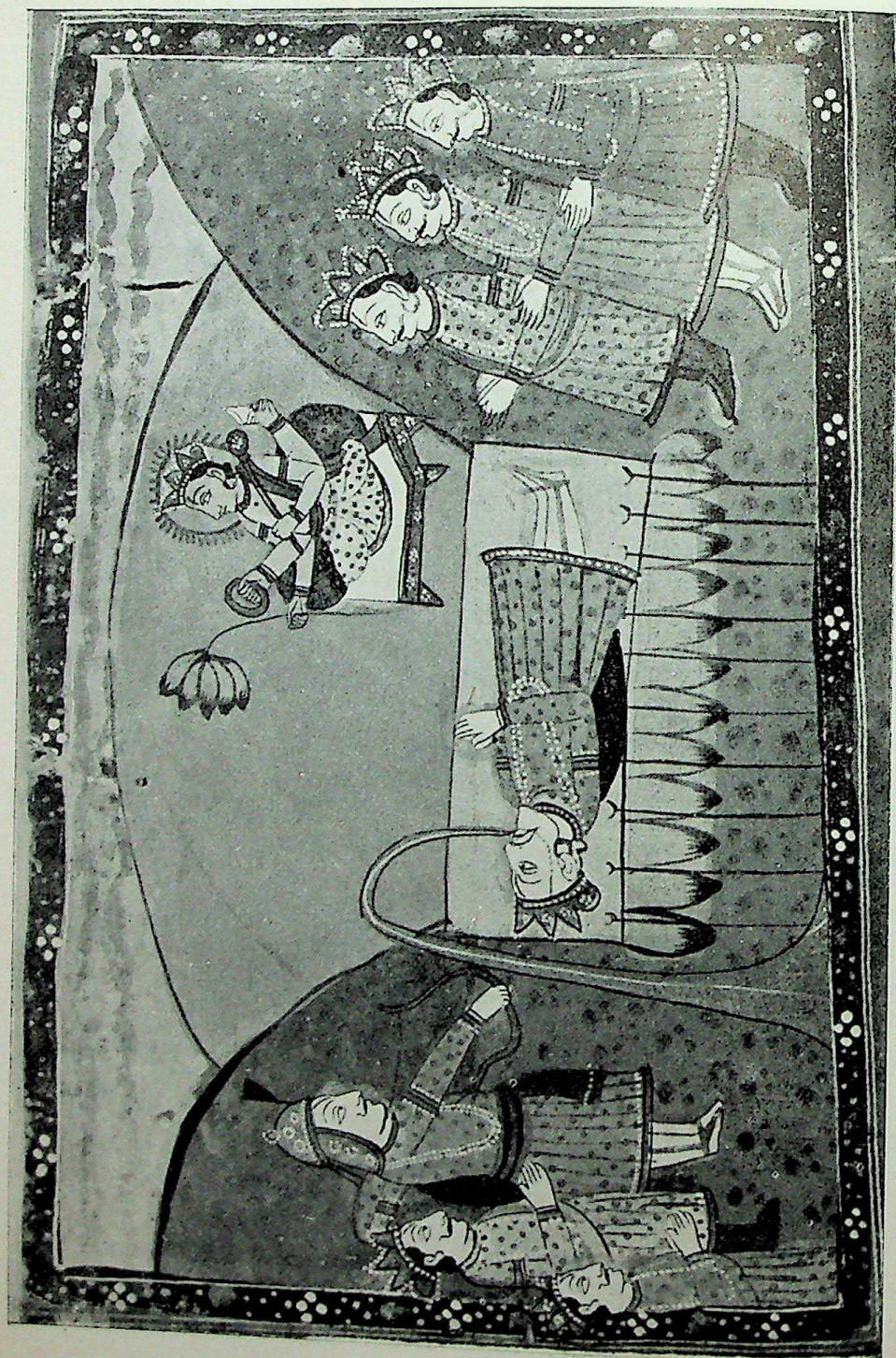


Fig. 16. Bāṇagaṅgā, a jet issuing to reach Bhīṣma lying on a bed of arrows. MS illustration, Kāśmīr school, 19th century A.D., National Museum.

The mere utterance of the name of Gaṅgā purifies a sinner. A sight of the river showers all auspiciousness. A bath in the stream or a sip of her water purifies seven generations of ancestors and descendants. The moment the bone relics of anyone touch the water of the Gaṅgā, the soul is transported to heaven. There is a saying that there is no tīrtha more sacred than the water of Gaṅgā and no God higher than Keśava :

*sarvam kṛtayuge puṇyam tretāyām puṣkaram smṛtam
dvāpare'pi kurukṣetram gaṅgā kalīyuge smṛtā
yāvadasthi manuṣyasya gaṅgāyās sprśate jalam
tāvat sa puruṣo rājan svargaloke mahīyate
na gaṅgāsadṛśam tīrtham na devaḥ keśavāt paraḥ*

(Mahābhārata 3, 85, 90, 94 and 96).

Immanence of Gaṅgā: Bāṇagaṅgā issuing from the tip of the arrow

When Bhīṣma lay on his bed of arrows on the battlefield at Kurukṣetra, he felt thirsty and asked for water. The several princes that were attending on him, including Duryodhana and others, rushed hither and thither to quickly obtain water from the nearest available spot, but the wise Arjuna fulfilled his wish immediately by shooting his arrow deep into the earth to bring out a jet of water, that spurted out and quenched Bhīṣma's thirst. This illustrates the omnipresence of the nearly always invisible form of Gaṅgā, the pure stream used not only to moisten the lips but also to purify the holy one on his deathbed. This is symbolically repeated even today when a ladle of Gaṅgā water is poured into the mouth of a dying person assuring him salvation and bliss. This jet of water drawn from the depths of the earth by Arjuna as Bhīṣma lay on a bed of arrows is a favourite theme in miniature painting (Fig. 16) and is one of the five pictures in the *Pañcaratnagitā* :

*avidhyat pṛthivīm pārthaḥ pārśve bhīṣmasya dakṣiṇe
utpapāta tato dhārā vāriṇo vimalā śubhā
śītasyāmṛtakalpasya divyā gandharasasya ca
atarpayat tataḥ pārthas śītayā jaladhārāyā*

(Mahābhārata 6, 121, 24-25).



Fig. 17. Bhīṣma on bed of arrows surrounded by sages sent by Gaṅgā, Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa, Kīśāgarh school, 18th century A.D., Bharat Kala Bhavan Museum, Banaras.

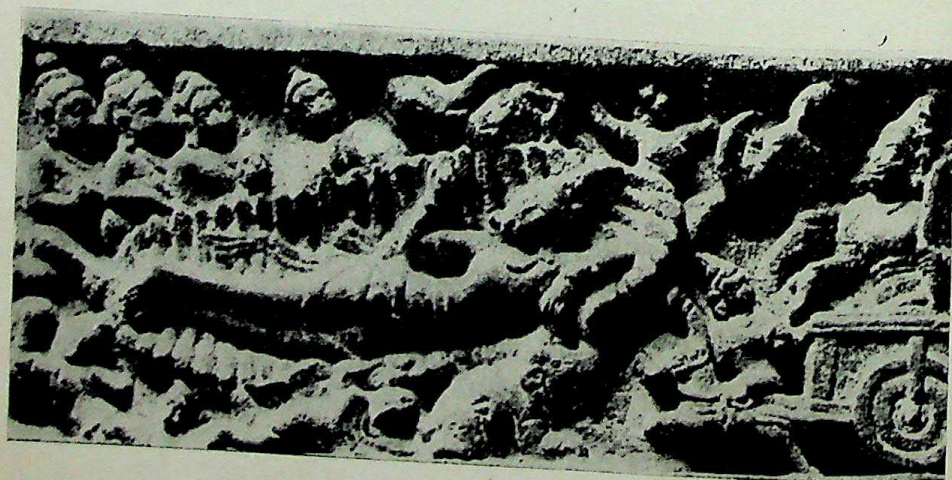


Fig. 18. Bhīṣma on *śaratalpa* or bed of arrows surrounded by sages, some in the guise of *hamsas* (geese), Kauravas, Pāṇḍavas, and Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in a chariot. Early Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭadakal, Karnāṭaka.

Bhīṣma, the son of Gaṅgā, was blessed in this way by his mother as he died. The story goes that when Gaṅgā learnt that Bhīṣma was lying on a bed of arrows after resolving to die only in *uttarāyaṇa*, she sent to him the holy Ṛṣis on her banks (Fig. 17) in the form of swans (Fig. 18), symbols of immaculate life and thought. The Ṛṣis blessed him with power to live on till the sun returned to the northern course, *uttarāyaṇa*, which would be the most auspicious moment for his casting off the mortal coil:

*uttarāyaṇam anvicchan bhīṣmaḥ kurupitāmahaḥ
tasya tanmatamājñāya gaṅgā himavatas sūtā
maharṣin haṁsarūpeṇa preṣayāmāsa tatra vai*

(Mahābhārata 6, 119, 97-98).

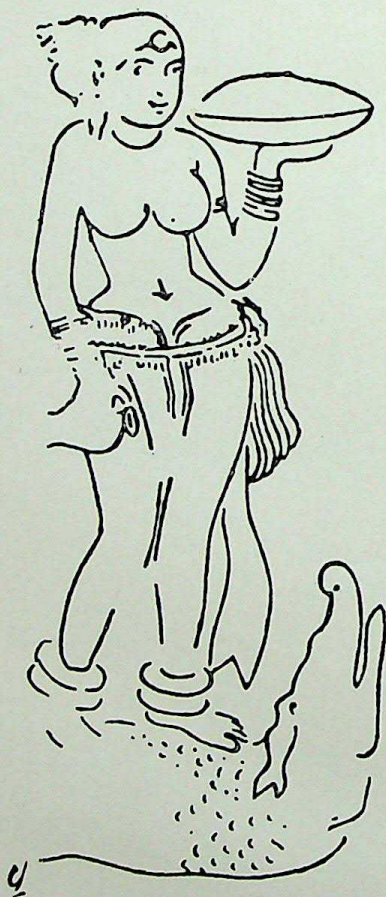


Fig. 19



Fig. 20a

Fig. 19. Gaṅgā as Nadīmātrkā on either side of Nāgarāja Mucalinda, Sāta-vāhana, 2nd century A.D., Amarāvati, Andhra Pradesh.

Fig. 20a. Goddess carrying food and water Nadīmātrkā, Kuṣāṇa 2nd century A.D., Bharat Kala Bhavan, Vārāṇasī, Uttar Pradesh.

7. Mother, Sustainer and Daughter

Gaṅgā, a river goddess and mother

Gaṅgā though not essentially different from other streams in India, is however considered the one and only holy stream that almost represents all the rest. The concept of the river in India is that of a sustaining mother. The stream of the river carries *payas*. The word *payas* stands for both water and milk. Appropriately this has been used in relation to the river as the stream that sustains the people, her children, with water, as a mother sustains her babies with her milk. This idea is uppermost in the mind of every poet, and Kālidāsa calls Gaṅgā *sāmānyadhātṛī*, a mother for the entire area she flows through. As Rāma approaches Ayodhyā in his aerial car and sights Sarayū, he addresses Sītā and describes the river in affectionate terms as if she were his mother beckoning and trying to embrace him with her wavy arms:

*seyam madīyā jananīva tena mānyena rājñā Sarayūr viyuktā
dūre vasantam śīśirānilair mām taraṅgahastair upagūhātīva*
(Raghuvamśa xiii, 63).

On her lap, the children of the soil could sit and muse without thought of the future, as the region known as *nadī-mātṛka* was sustained by the river:

*yām saikatotsaṅgasukhocitānām prājyair payobhiḥ parivardhi-
tānām
sāmānyadhātṛīm iva mānasam me sambhāvayatyuttarakosa-
lānām*
(Raghuvamśa xiii, 52).

Its opposite was *Deva-mātṛka*, a region depending solely on the gods for rain.



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Figs. 20 and 21. Goddess carrying food and water, Nadīmātrkā, Kuṣāṇa, 2nd century A.D., Mathurā Museum, Uttar Pradesh.

Gaṅgā as sustainer

Why is it that the Gaṅgā is depicted on both door jambs of temples in South India? The reason is not far to seek. Gaṅgā is the most important river, she is the model for all others, and naturally she alone is repeated. We find that the river goddess on the *makara* which typifies the Gaṅgā is represented as early as the second century A.D. on a slab at Amarāvati; she is repeated here as in later sculpture, and two identical figures of the river goddess flank a Nāga. The original slab is now in the British Museum. Here the goddess is shown carrying food and water in a tray and a jug respectively, and resembles exactly a similar figure of Kuśāṇa date, without the vehicle, in the Bhārat Kalā Bhavan at Banaras (Figs. 20, 20a). This attitude of the goddess suggesting abundant water and food obtained by a plentiful harvest of splendid crops raised without the least effort in the river-irrigated area (Fig. 21), reminds us of the line by Bhāravi in the context of the peace and plenty of the Kuru realm, watered by the Yamunā and the Gaṅgā that assure crops without toil:

*sukhena labhyā dadhataḥ kṛṣṇivalair
akṛṣṭapacyā iva sasyasaṃpadah
vitanvati kṣemam adevamātrkāś
cirāya tasmīn kuravaś cakāśati* (Kīratārjunīya i, 17).

This sculpture is a visual commentary on the term *nadīmātrka* which is the same as *adevamātrka*, as opposed to *devamātrka*.

Following the description of *Nadīdevatā* in the *Viṣṇudharmottara*, which records the traditional concept of the river goddess, there are carvings in Amarāvati that show her carrying a *pūrṇakumbha* or a vessel brimming with water (Fig. 19). The *pūrṇakumbha* itself, with lotuses and water, is a symbol not only of plenty and auspiciousness but also of the river, and the earliest symbolic representation of the purifying influence of the river goddess, guarding the temple entrance on either side, which accounts for the presence of *pūrṇakumbhas* flanking the doorway (Fig. 22): *prāgdvāravediviviveśitapūrṇakumbhām* (Raghuvaṃśa v, 63).

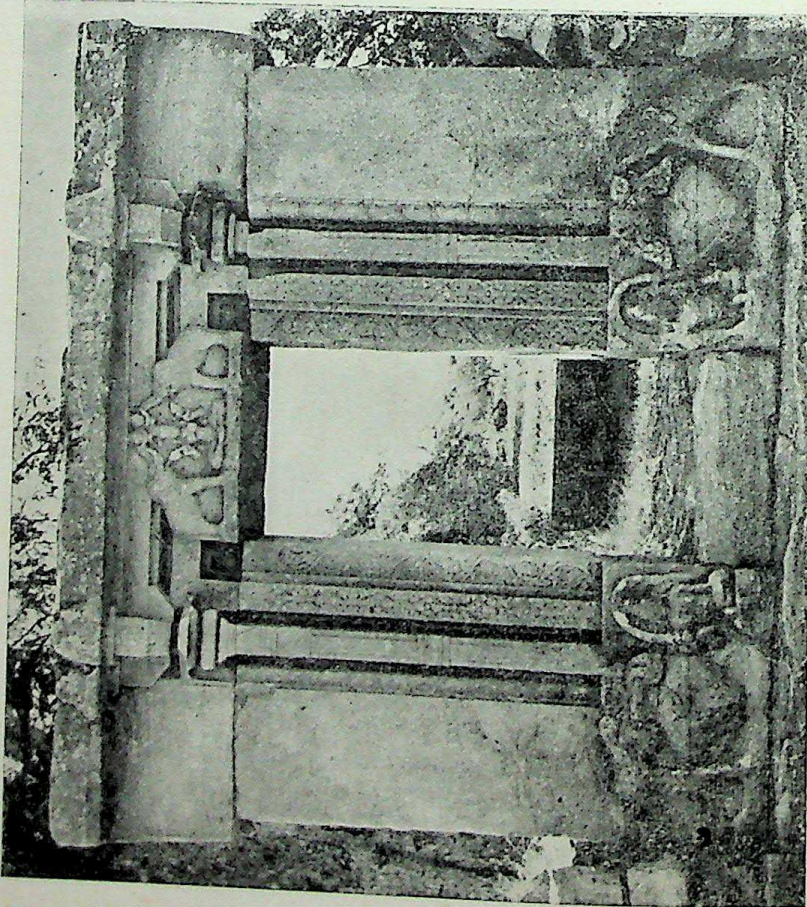


Fig. 22. Pūrnakumbha representing Gaṅgā and Yamunā flanking the doorway.
Early Western Chālukya, 6th century A.D., Aihole, Mysore.

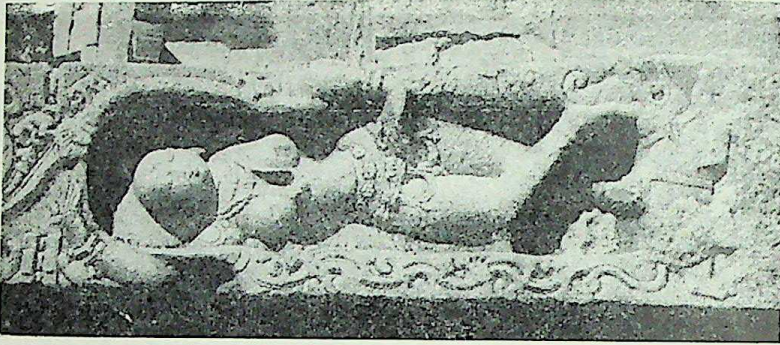


Fig. 23. Gaṅgā as guardian of gateway on doorjamb, Vijayanagara, 16th century A.D., Hampi, Mysore.

Gaṅgā, symbol of purity

Of all rivers, Gaṅgā has always had the highest appeal. Her sacred name is on the lips of every Hindu and the sincere belief is that mere utterance of her name purifies one. She is the heavenly river that the earth was fortunate enough to receive when brought by the great efforts of an indefatigable chain of princes for the purification not only of their ancestors' ashes but of one and all. It is the standard by which the greatness of every other river is judged, as the Gaṅgā stands supreme among all others. A number of other rivers such as the Kāverī, are believed to be transformed into the Gaṅgā at least for a few days in the year. At any rate, this is the faith that inspires pilgrims who dip in the river on those sacred days specified in the *Purāṇas*.

Gaṅgā and Yamunā as dvārapālikās purify visitors

As one enters the *gopura* of any temple in South India, one may see on either side of the door jamb a figure of Gaṅgā standing on a *makara* and holding a creeper that issues from its mouth (Fig. 23). This proceeds in a meandering fashion to form circles that frame panels and represent different forms of deities and figures of dancers that run in a line up to the lintel, several feet in height. Gaṅgā's presence purifies the visitor as he enters. One may wonder why Gaṅgā is repeated on the *makara* twice, once on either side, and why she of all other rivers should have been chosen for representation when other rivers such as the Godāvarī, the Kṛṣṇaveṇī and the Kāverī are there to choose from. The obvious reason is that Gaṅgā is considered the holiest. To see why Gaṅgā is so represented in sculpture, it will be necessary to look at Gupta sculpture, especially that on temple door jambs. Gaṅgā and Yamunā are represented in human form on temple door jambs almost invariably. The rivers stand on their respective vehicles, the *makara* and the *kacchapa*, crocodile and tortoise,

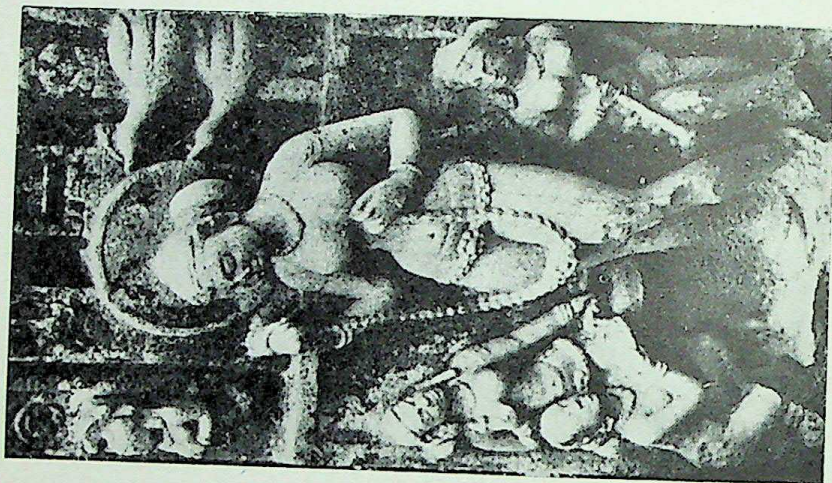


Fig. 26. Close up of Gaṅgā and Yamunā as guardians of the gateway of Śiva, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Dah Parvatiya, Assam.

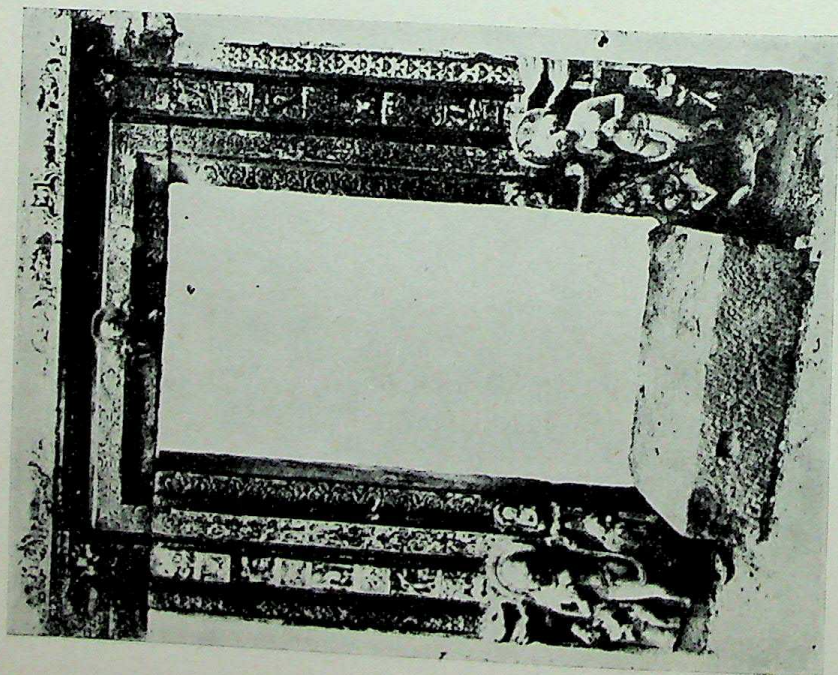


Fig. 25. Gaṅgā and Yamunā as guardians of the gateway of Śiva, Gupta, 5th century A.D., Dah Parvatiya, Assam.

waited on by their attendants — a maid raising an umbrella over Gaṅgā's head and a maid carrying Yamunā's wallet (Fig. 27). Swans that flutter above with garlands of lotuses and lilies in their beaks, evoke cool, fragrant and aquatic associations. The fluttering Vidyādhara above holding garlands suggest the highest honour and reverence that even the celestials have for the river goddess. Sometimes both river goddesses carry water jars, as they should do, according to the *Śilpa* texts that describe their iconography, as for instance in the *Viṣṇudharmottara* (Fig. 24). Even Gaṅgā in human form reminds us at once of Kālidāsa's description of rivers in anthropomorphic form attending on Śiva.

A very fine representation of Gaṅgā and Yamunā guarding the doorway comes from Dah Parvatiya in Assam (Figs. 25 and 26). A similar one from Buxar in Bihar in the Indian Museum is also interesting. The *sārasa* birds fluttering over the head of the river goddess, as though fascinated by the sweet notes of the tiny, jingling, golden beads of her girdle, present a picture like that painted by Kālidāsa of similar birds on the wing over the stream of the Godāvarī:

*amūr vimānāntaralambinīnām
śrutvā svanam kāñcanakīṅkiṇīnām
pratyudvrajaṇtīva kham utpatantyo
godāvarī-sārasapaṅktayas tvām (Raghuvaṃśa xiii, 33).*

Gaṅgā as an adornment for the earth

In the mind of the Gupta and Vākāṭaka sculptor, and even in earlier centuries, it is the *ekāvalī* composed of fine pearls that was preferred among necklets and this preference often expresses itself through the brush and chisel in painting and carving; in representations of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā the same *ekāvalī* is shown to beautify the neck. In picturesque fashion Kālidāsa presents the pure white stream of the Gaṅgā gradually narrowing in size in the distant landscape, as a necklace of pearls closely fitting the earth damsel's neck:

*eṣā prasannastimitappravāhā
sarid vidūrāntarabhāvatānvī
mandākinī bhāti nagopakāṇṭhe
muktāvalī kaṇṭhagateva bhūmeḥ (Raghuvaṃśa xiii, 48).*

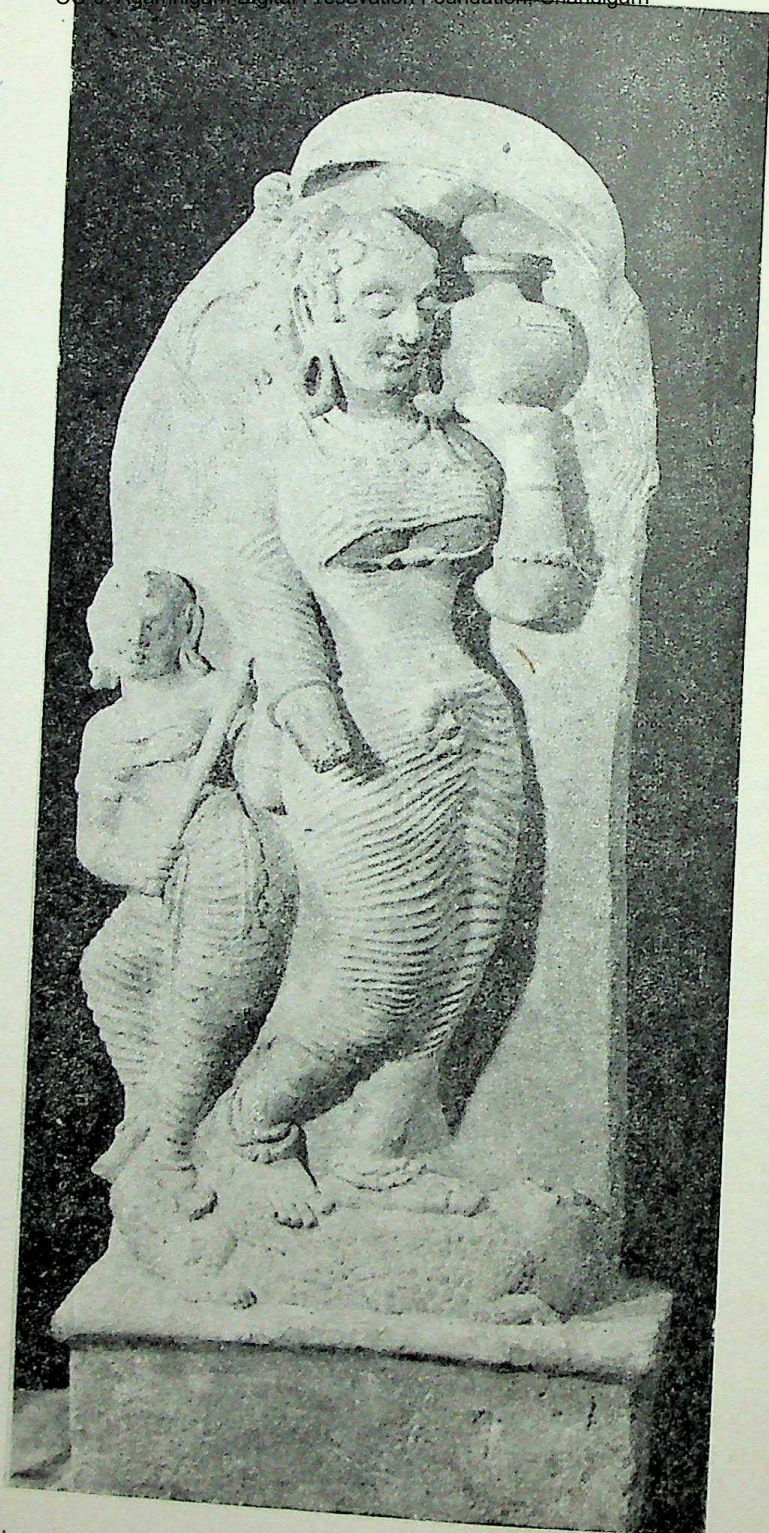


Fig. 24. Terracottas, the largest of the kind, representing Gaṅgā and Yamunā as guardians of the gateway of Śiva, Ahicchatrā, Uttar Pradesh.

The commingling of Gaṅgā and Yamunā

The Gupta sculptor was as fascinated with the beauty of the mingling of the colours of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā in the confluence at Prayāga, as Kālidāsa himself, whose fancy brings both streams close enough even before they commingle, to create an optical illusion. The beauty of the white stream of Gaṅgā enhanced by the commingling of the blue waters of the Yamunā stirs Kālidāsa's fancy into suggesting that the white sandal paste from the breasts of the damsels in the Śūrasena king Suśeṇa's harem washed off during their sportive baths, makes Yamunā look as if she were charged with the waters of the Gaṅgā, even near Mathurā:

*yasyāvarodhastanacandanānām
prakṣālanād vārivihārakāle
kalindakanyā mathurām gatāpi
gaṅgormisaṃsaktajaleva bhāti* (Raghuvamśa vi, 48).

Appayyā Dīkṣita in his *Kuvalayānanda* gives just the opposite picture of how the collyrium from the eyes of the damsels of the Mālava king's enemies had made the stream of Narmadā dark, and consequently created a misapprehension in the mind of Samudrarāja, the lord of the rivers:

*kālindi brūhi kumbhodbhava jaladhir aham nāma gṛhṇāsi kasmā-
cchatror me narmadāham tvam api vadasi me nāma kasmāt
sapatnyāḥ
mālinyam tarhi kasmād anubhavasi milatkajjalair mālavinām
netrāmbhobhiḥ kim āsām samajani kupitaḥ kuntalakṣṇipālāḥ*
(*Kuvalayānanda*).

The most glorious picture in literature of the commingling of rivers is that of the Gaṅgā and Yamunā by Kālidāsa. This picturesque confluence at Prayāga has made it a great *tīrtha*, and Kālidāsa's description is a painting in words, like the masterpiece of the sculptor which has glorified the *tīrtha* by representing the rivers personified on their streams which commingle and flow to meet Samudrarāja, as depicted in the Udayagiri cave in Central India.

The confluence of these two rivers that arrests attention both by its natural charm and aesthetic appeal as well as its sanctity, is probably unrivalled. The confluences of several rivers that become sacred spots, are known by the appellation, *tīrtha*; even individual rivers can become *tīrthas*, and their water is purifying in effect: *śivāni vaś tīrthajalāni kaccit*. The *tīrtha* was so highly revered and played such an important role in the life of man in ancient India, that it stands



Fig. 27. Gaṅgā on her *makara* with attendants as guardians of the doorway.
Gurjara Pratihāra, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh.

to reason that there should be, wherever possible, a visual representation of one of the most outstanding of its kind in India; the importance of Prayāga being what it is, it is represented in one of the earliest Gupta sculptures. The confluence at Prayāga is sanctified in the *Purāṇas*, deep-rooted in faith, and a hallowed spot for pilgrimage from all over the subcontinent. The most important description in literature and undoubtedly the most picturesque of the commingling of rivers, that of Gaṅgā and Yamunā, is given by the sweetest of poets, Kālidāsa. 'Yonder flows Gaṅgā with her stream broken by the wavelets of Yamunā, appearing here like a necklace of pearls interspersed with sapphires shedding lustre, there like a garland of white lotuses with blue lilies woven into it at intervals; sometimes like the row of white swans fond of the Mānasa lake touching the dark swans, elsewhere like decorative creeper patterns painted in dark *Aguru* paste on sandal background for the earth; somewhere like the moonlight mottled by dark patches of shade here and there, elsewhere like a line of spotless autumnal clouds with the sky seen through the interstices; and somewhere like the body of Śiva smeared with ashes and decorated with black serpents.' This glorious confluence of rivers with an effect in colour realised visually and not easily expressed in words, has been most vividly expressed by the great poet in his verses:

*kvacit prabhālepibhir indranīlair
muktāmayī yaṣṭir ivānuviddhā
anyatra mālā sitapaṅkajānām
indīvarair utkhacitāntareva
kvacit khagānām priyamānasānām
kadambasamsargavatīva paṅktiḥ
anyatra kā'āgurudattapatrā
bhaktir bhuvas candanakalpiteva
kvacit prabhā cāndramasī tamobhis
chāyāvilīnais śabalīkrteva
anyatra śubhrā śaradabhralekhā
randhreṣvivilakṣyaṇabhahpradeśā
kvacit ca kṛṣṇoragabhūṣaṇeva
bhasmāṅgarāgā tanur īśvarasya
paśyānavadyāṅgi vibhāti gaṅgā
bhinnapravāhā yamunātaraṅgaiḥ* (*Raghuvamśa* xiii, 54-57).

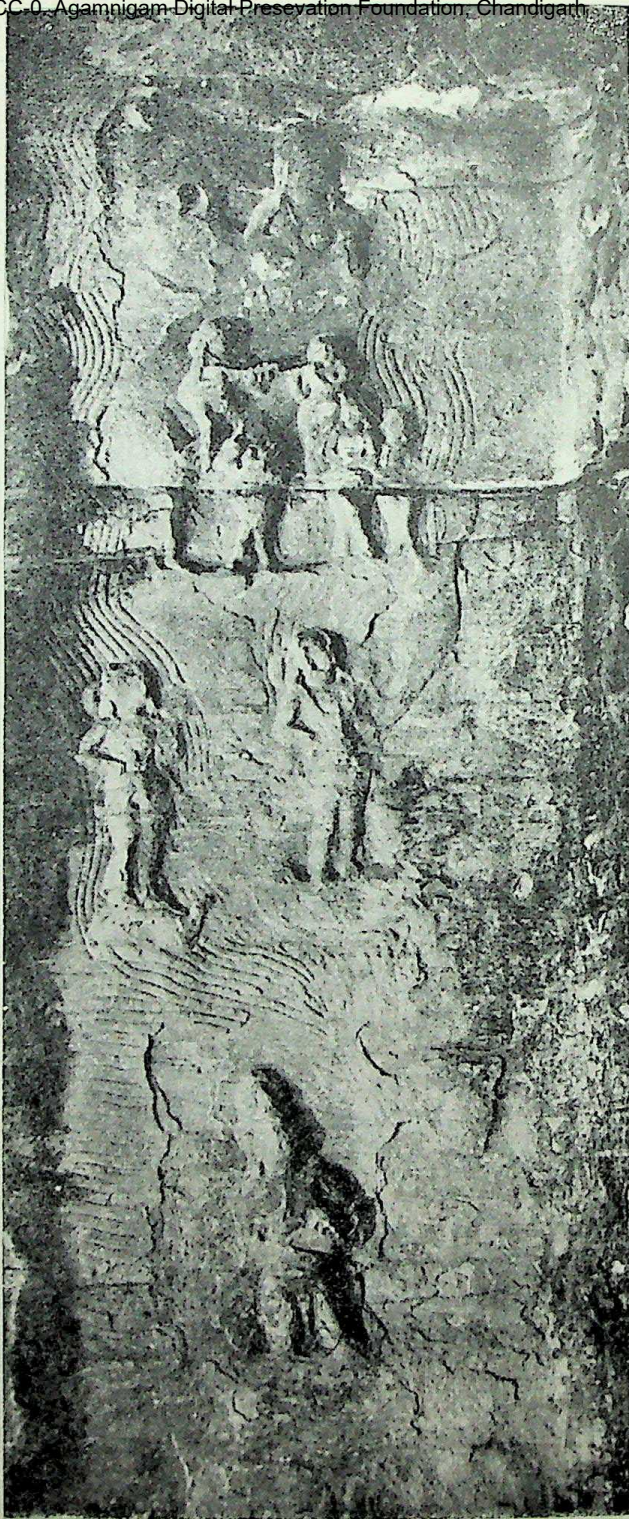


Fig. 28. The confluence of the three rivers, Trivenī saṅgama, Gupta, 4th century A.D., Udayagiri, Madhya Pradesh.

In the next verse,

*samudrapatnyor jalasannipāte
pūtātmanām atra kilābhiṣekāt
tatvāvabodhena vināpi bhūyas
tanutyajām nāsti śarīrabandhaḥ* (Raghuvamśa xiii, 58),

the sanctity of the confluence of the two rivers is clearly stated, for a bath in the holy water is more efficacious than even the attainment of supreme knowledge which assures release from the bondage of birth and death and immortality. The sacred *kṣetra*, the greatest among holy spots in India visited by pilgrims and eulogised by Kālidāsa, has been presented graphically in sculpture in the cave at Udayagiri in Central India in the vicinity of Mahāvarāha (Fig. 28). Viṣṇu raised Pṛthvī from the ocean and served as the model for the great Gupta kings who rescued the earth and their own families and raised their royal glory to heights worthy of their prowess. In this context and scene Samudra is personified as carrying a *ratnakalaśa* to suggest that he is *Ratnākara*. The rivers flow into the ocean, the streams are shown commingling their waters with it. The two principal holy rivers, Gaṅgā and Yamunā, are shown standing in human form, each on her own vehicle and on their own streams which join and proceed to meet the ocean, also personified, that stands to receive them. There is music, dance and festivity as the pilgrims bathe. The result of this bath, immortality, gained by becoming a divine being, is suggested by the immortals fluttering above the stream. This is a vivid picture of a great *tīrtha*, probably the most important in India, and the only one that has been so effectively represented in sculpture.



Fig. 29. Gaṅgā as Suranimnagā or heavenly stream under the Kalpa tree. Sena, 12th century A.D., Mahānāḍ, West Bengal.

Gaṅgā, daughter of the mountain king, Himavān

Himālaya typifies nobility as a lofty, unswerving and massive object, great and unparalleled glacier that he is. He is the lord of all mountains: *himālayo nāma nagādhirājaḥ*. That is why he is considered the motionless form of Viṣṇu himself: *sthāne tvām sthāvar-ātmanam viṣṇum āhus tathā hi te* (*Kumārasambhava*, vi, 72). Very often, the mountain is called the father of Gaurī: *pādās tām abhito niṣaṇṇahariṇā gaurīguroḥ pavanāḥ* (*Abhijñānaśākuntalam* vi, 18). Himavān who is mighty, auspicious, noble and majestic, is also holy, but even he, the motionless aspect of Viṣṇu, is rendered more holy by the Gaṅgā flowing from his crest. He is conscious of this fact when he specially makes this remark as he welcomes the seven holy sages, *sapta ṛṣis*, who approach him for the betrothal of Umā with Śiva:

*avaimi pūtam ātmānam dvayenaiva dvijottamāḥ
mūrdhni gaṅgāprapātena dhautapādāmbhasā ca vah*
(*Kumārasambhava* vi, 57).

Just as Gaṅgā is proud of her origin in the foot of Viṣṇu, so is she equally proud of her consequent origin from the crest of Himālaya. This doubly assures the noblest *ābhijātya*, birth of the highest consequence:

*yathaiva slāghyate gaṅgā pādena parameṣṭhinaḥ
prabhāvena dvitīyena tathāivocchirasā tvayā*
(*Kumārasambhava* vi, 70).

Gaṅgā as Suranimnagā

Before descending on the crest of Himavān or even on the *jaṭās* of Śiva, Gaṅgā flowed as the river of the celestials. In this special aspect, she has her own characteristic like Surabhi or the divine cow, that rests under the shade of the *Kalpaka* tree, *āsīt kalpatarucchāyām āśritā surabhiḥ pathi*, since Gaṅgā also flows past the *kalpavṛkṣa*. An anthropomorphic form of Gaṅgā is represented in a Sena sculpture, standing under the *kalpavṛkṣa* and holding, as a river goddess should, a *pūrṇakumbha* or a brimming vessel in her hand, suggestive of the abundance of her holy water. This beautiful sculpture of the Eastern Indian medieval school (Fig. 29) is undoubtedly one of the best representations of Gaṅgā, and significantly also a suggestive one, indicating the celestial association of the river Suranimnagā.

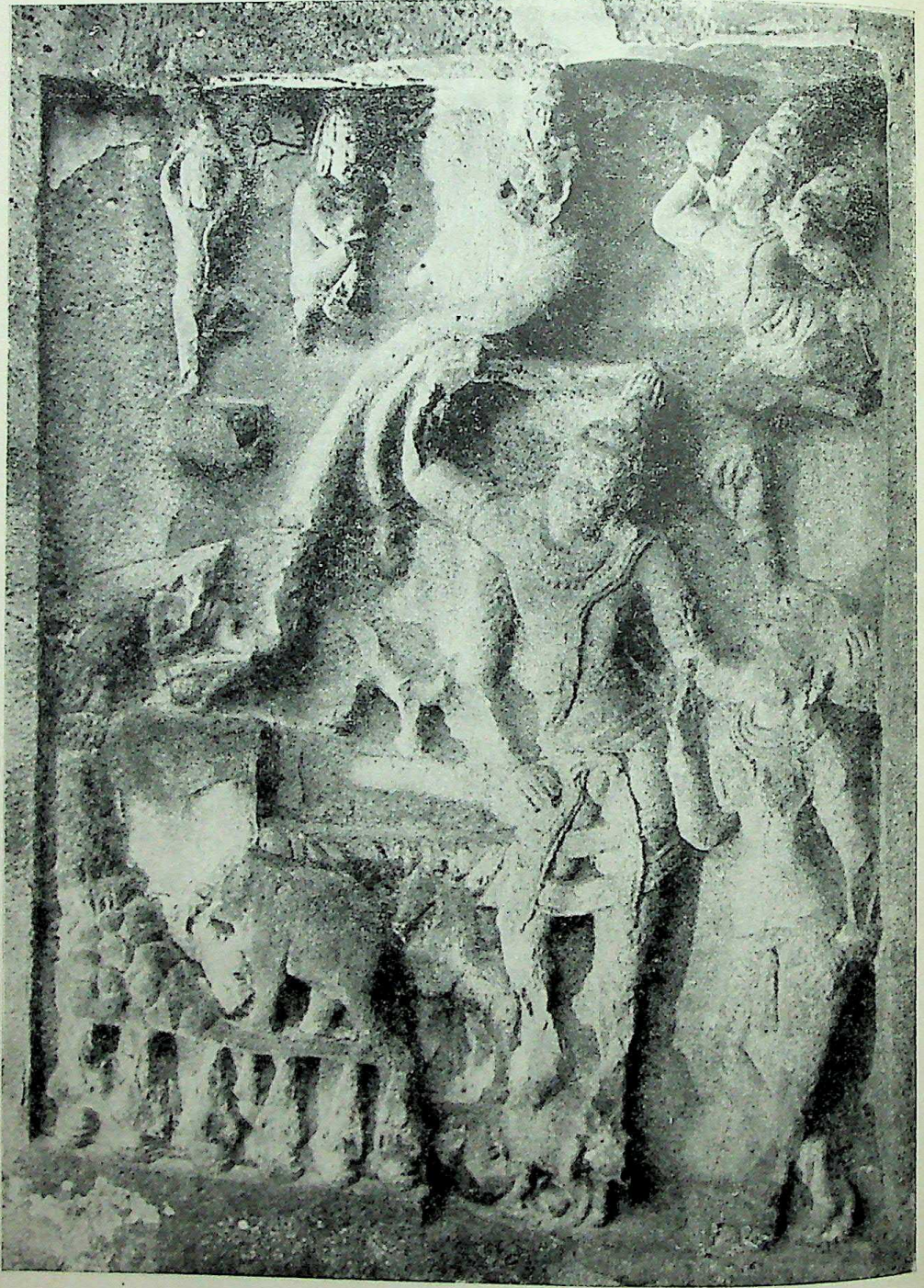


Fig. 30. Gaṅgāvisarjanamūrti, Rāṣṭrakūṭa, 8th century A.D., Ellora.

Jāhnavī Gaṅgā or the daughter of Jahnu

At Ellora the appellation *Jahnoḥ kanyām* of Kālidāsa has a pictorial commentary as it were, as the panel here is not of Gaṅgādhara-mūrti but of Gaṅgāvisarjanamūrti, Śiva releasing Gaṅgā from his locks at the earnest request of Bhagīratha (Fig. 30). Here Gaṅgā all pride, descending torrentially onto the locks of Śiva, and subsequently humbled, is seen imprisoned in the cage of locks for a number of years. It was only after Bhagīratha's desperate entreaties that she was released again.



Fig. 34. Gaṅgā received in the water vessel of sage Jahnu and released again through his ear to flow from the Himālaya. Western Gālukya, 8th century A.D., Pattaḍakal, Mysore.

This time, as the stream followed Bhagīratha she devastated the hermitage of the sage Jahnu on the way and so enraged him that in one gulp he swallowed up the mighty river, to the utter dismay of Bhagīratha who, this time, had to entreat the sage to release the river again. As the sage graciously obliged him, the river Gaṅgā was allowed to flow out again through his ear, and ever since, the ear has been considered the birth place of Gaṅgā; even in *Sandhyā* the ear is touched in lieu of washing the hand. Issuing from the ear of the sage Jahnu she became the daughter of Jahnu, Jāhnavī, and it is as Jāhnavī that she flowed again towards where Bhagīratha led her to wash the ashes of his ancestors. In the sculpture from Paṭṭadakal (Fig. 34) as at Ellora the sage Jahnu is shown seated sipping Gaṅgā as she issued from Śiva's locks, releasing her through the ear (Fig. 30).

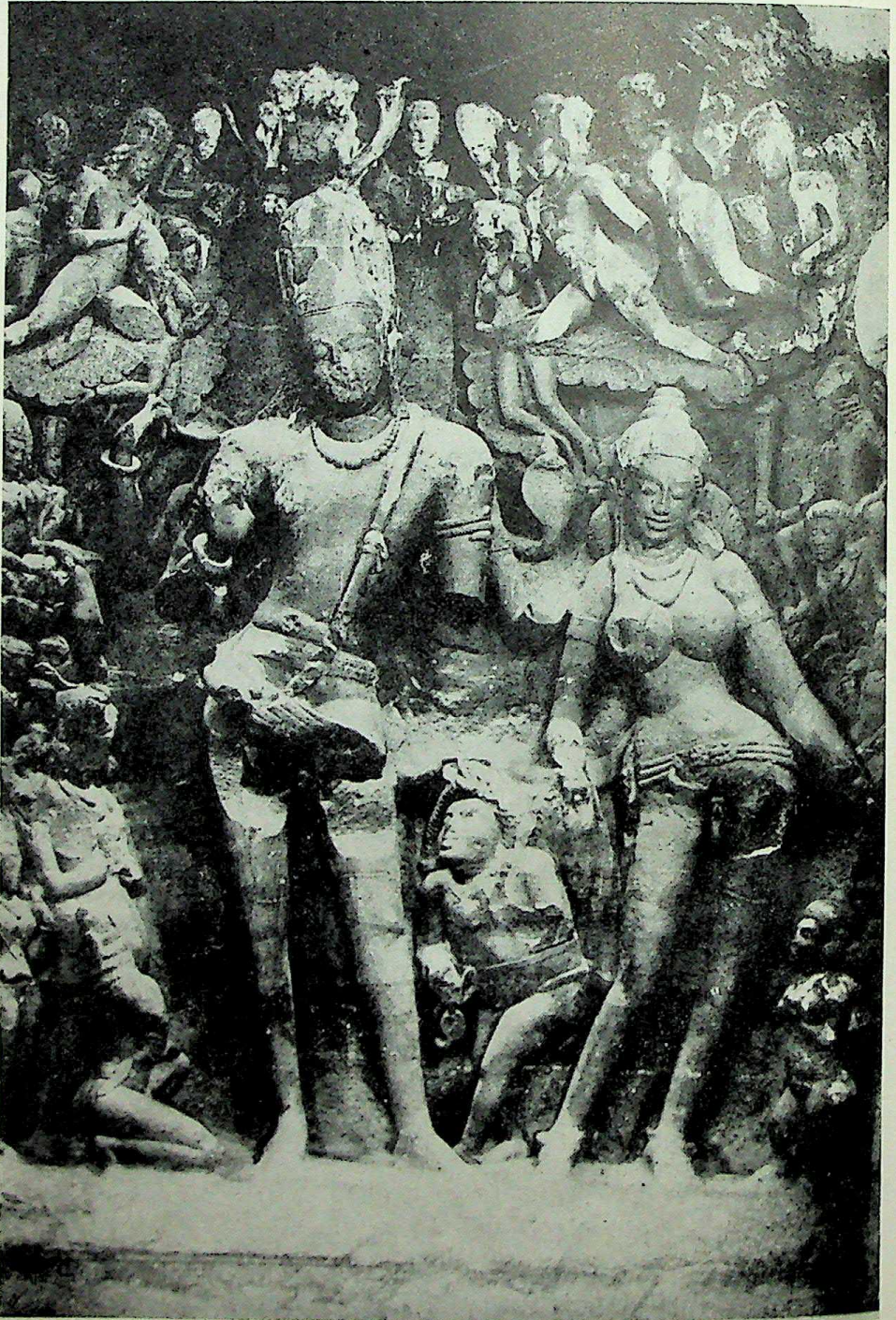


Fig. 31. Gaṅgādhara receiving Gaṅgā as a triple stream, Tripathagā Trisrotas, Vākāṭaka, 5th century A.D., Elephanṭā, Maharashtra.

Gaṅgā as Trisrotas

At Elephāntā there is a marvellous panel representing Śiva as Gaṅgādhara, but here the sculptor is not satisfied with a tame representation of just a mermaid-like figure for the river. The three streams of Gaṅgā as she flows in heaven, on earth and in the nether-world, in which aspects she is Tripathagā and Trisrotas, are delineated as the three faces of the mermaid on the locks of Śiva (Fig. 31). They also suggest the Trivenī or the three streams, Gaṅgā with Yamunā and Sarasvatī that join and swell her waters, further sanctifying the already sacred stream of the heavenly river. This is an outstanding sculptural rendering of the Trivenī aspect of Gaṅgā in a Gaṅgādhara panel.

Gaṅgā as Tripathagā

The greatest glory of Gaṅgā is that she is the one river to be singled out for representation. She has three streams, she flows in three regions and she purifies three different areas. Kālidāsa delights in often referring to Gaṅgā, the stream as she flows in heaven as Ākāśagaṅgā, wherein the elephants of the eight quarters bathe with delight and the seven Ṛṣis perform their holy ablutions:

nadatyākāśagaṅgāyā srotasyuddāmadiggaje (Raghuvamśa i, 78)

and

āplutas tīramandāarakusumotkiravīciṣu vyomagaṅgāpravāheṣu
(Kumārasambhava vi, 5).
dīṅgnāgamadagandhiṣu

The presence of Gaṅgā in Pātāla was a matter of necessity as Bhagīratha's ancestors who pursued the sacrificial horse were cursed there. Gaṅgā, who with her cool breeze and the shade of Mandāra trees on her bank, served as the ideal pleasure ground for divine beings:

mandākinīyās salilāśīśirais sevyamānā marudbhīr
mandārāṇām anutaṭaruhām chāyayā vāritoṣṇāḥ
(Meghadūta ii, 6).

trickled down from Śiva's locks on which she had fallen, and following Bhagīratha, reached the ashes of his ancestors in the nether-world to take them by the efficacy of her purificatory power and step by step, as on a ladder, to heaven:

jahnōḥ kanyām sagaratanayasvargasopānapāṅktim
(Meghadūta i, 50).



Fig. 35. Gaṅgā flowing past in diggajas in Pātāla to purify the sins of the sons of Sagara. Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭadakal, Mysore.



Fig. 32. Story of Gaṅgā, Gaṅgā and Vasus, Western Cālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭadakal, Mysore.

Gaṅgā as Tripathagā, the sacred river purifying the three worlds, is the theme of a sculptural narration on a pillar in the Virūpākṣa temple at Paṭṭaḍakal. Here is represented her great spirit of self-sacrifice and kind compliance with the wishes of the Vasus whom she delivered from the curse of Vasiṣṭha (Fig. 32), and her efforts to wash the remains of and raise to heaven, the sons of Sagara who were burnt by sage Kapila, whom they attempted to attack for carrying away their sacrificial horse, as they supposed by the presence of the animal in his vicinity in Pātāla. The netherworld is indicated by the *diggaja* supporting the earth, and the sixty thousand princes who rushed as one against Kapila are suggested in one aggressive figure attacking a sage; the approach of Gaṅgā is, as in the other panels, suggested both by a stream and by her anthropomorphic form as a damsel (Fig. 35).

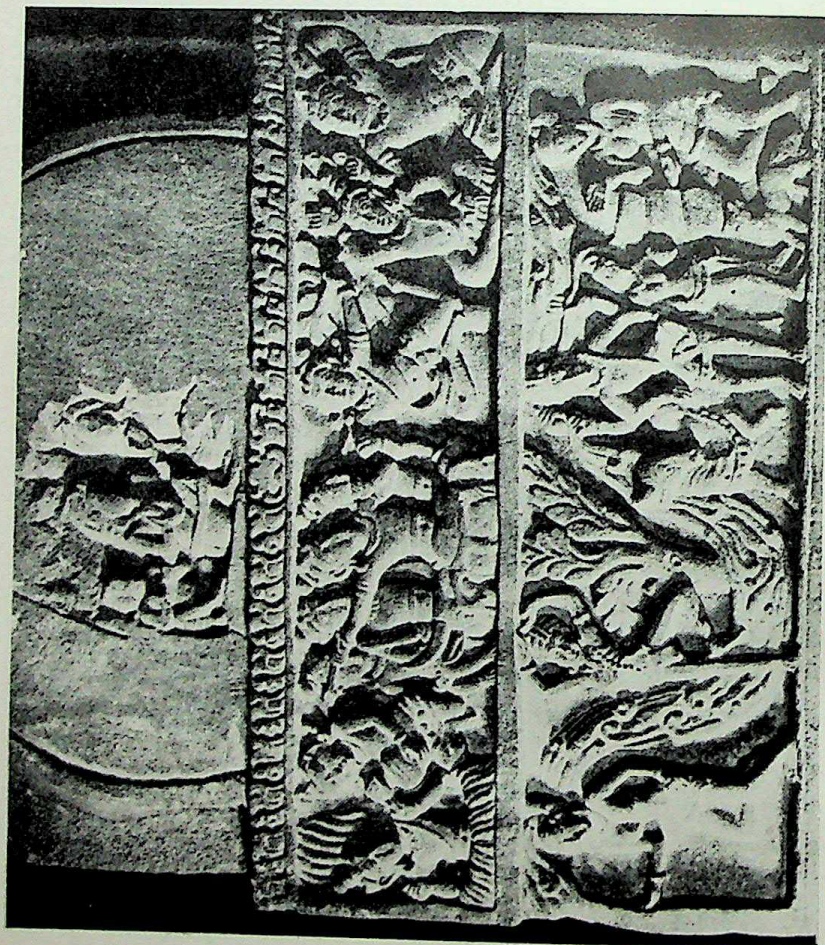


Fig. 33. Gaṅgā flowing onto Śiva's locks and released therefrom by the prayers of Bhagiratha, Western Gālukya, 8th century A.D., Paṭṭadakal, Mysore.

Her descent to earth is depicted in the panel where the stream and the maiden representing it, approach Śiva who receives her on his locks and imprisons her there (Fig. 33). Once again on the strength of Bhagīratha's prayers and severe penance the stream of Gaṅgā is released and proceeds towards the mountain Himavān, whence she flows down past sage Jahnu's hermitage where the enraged anchorite receives her in his *kamaṇḍalu* and swallows her in one gulp (Fig. 34). Again on the entreaties of Bhagīratha she is released through the ear of the sage (Fig. 34), to finally reach the ashes of the sons of Sagara in the netherworld.

The description of how Kuśa, when he approached Gaṅgā on his way to Ayodhyā from Kuśāvati to re-establish it as his capital, bowed to the holy river whose waters conducted to the world of immortals, the remains of his ancestors who were reduced to ashes by the anger of Kapila, suggests the veneration due to this great river. Even Kuśa, the very image of his father who was the great incarnation of the Lord Himself, bowed to her with devotion:

*sa pūrvajānām kapilena roṣād
bhasmāvaśeṣīkṛtavigrahāṇām
surālayaprāptinimittam ambhas
traisrotasam naululitam vavande* (Raghuvamśa xvi, 35).



Fig. 36. Gaṅgā descending on Śiva's locks, Śiva appeasing Pārvatī. Vijayanagara, 16th century A.D., Lepākṣī, Andhra Pradesh.

In a panel depicting Gaṅgādhara in the Śiva temple built by the mighty Coḷa emperor, Rājendra at Gaṅgaikōṇḍaḷapuram, this story of Bhagīratha's penance is clearly illustrated. Gaṅgā was revered so much by this mighty monarch that he brought the water of the sacred river down to the south in vessels offered as tribute by kings overcome by him in battle in the region of the river. A large lake dug for this purpose was the 'liquid pillar of victory', and he assumed the title 'Gaṅgaikōṇḍaḷa', the Coḷa who brought the Gaṅgā. The central panel in the niche depicts Śiva appeasing Pārvatī who is vexed with him and consequently turns her face away, distressed at the prospect of a co-wife in Gaṅgā who has settled on the locks of Śiva. At Lepākṣī there is a painting that graphically renders this theme (Fig. 36). It is for Kālidāsa to give colour to this domestic quarrel in Śiva's household in the vivid picture he presents of how Gaṅgā clutched at Śiva's locks with her wavy hands, laughing through her waters at Pārvatī's angry face:

*tasmād gaccher anukanakhalam śailarājāvatīrṇām
jahnoḥ kanyām sagaratanayasvargasopānapaṅktīm
gaurīvaktṛabhrukūṭīracanām yā vihasyeva phenais
śambhoḥ keśagrahaṇam akaroḍ indulagnormihastā*

(Meghadūta i, 50).

The carvings on either side of the panel show the penance of Bhagīratha and his determined effort to bring the Gaṅgā from heaven, a determination which has become proverbial on account of its almost impossible nature. However mighty and torrential Gaṅgā may have been, and we know according to the story that she came down with great force expecting Śiva to collapse under the great torrent, she was, nevertheless, lost in his profusion of locks.



Fig. 37. Gaṅgādhara with one foot placed on ignorance represented by a dwarf, and receiving the pure and enlightening Gaṅgā. Pallava, 7th century A.D. Tiruchirāpaḷli, Tamil Nadu.

In sculptures Gaṅgā is therefore depicted as approaching Śiva humbly. In carvings representing Gaṅgādhara in South India and the Deccan and also at Elephantā, Gaṅgā on the locks of Śiva is represented in true aquatic fashion as a mermaid. One or two locks of Śiva singled out and held lightly to receive the mighty torrent, show how easy was this sport for the Lord who could swallow the poison, Kālakūṭa, no less easily. At Tirucirāpaḷli, in the Pallava cave, the Gaṅgādhara panel represents the simple ease with which Gaṅgā was received by Śiva (Fig. 37). The finest representation of Gaṅgā in mermaid fashion is probably found in the temple at Dārāsuram and in this the wavy line decoration on the lower part of the figure suggests beautifully the form of the heavenly river.

The blessed life on the banks of the Gaṅgā

Dwelling on the banks of the river Gaṅgā is a privilege. Sanskrit rhetoricians take a delight in explaining the line *gaṅgāyām ghoṣaḥ* as suggesting pleasant cool, breezes and a purifying atmosphere, *śaitya pāvanādi*. But it is not the proximity of the Gaṅgā alone that is believed to have this purifying effect. Even from a great distance the very utterance of the name is enough for the attainment of final bliss:

*gaṅgā gaṅgeti yo brūyād yojanānām śatairapi
vimuktas sarvapāpebhyo viṣṇulokam sa gacchati.*

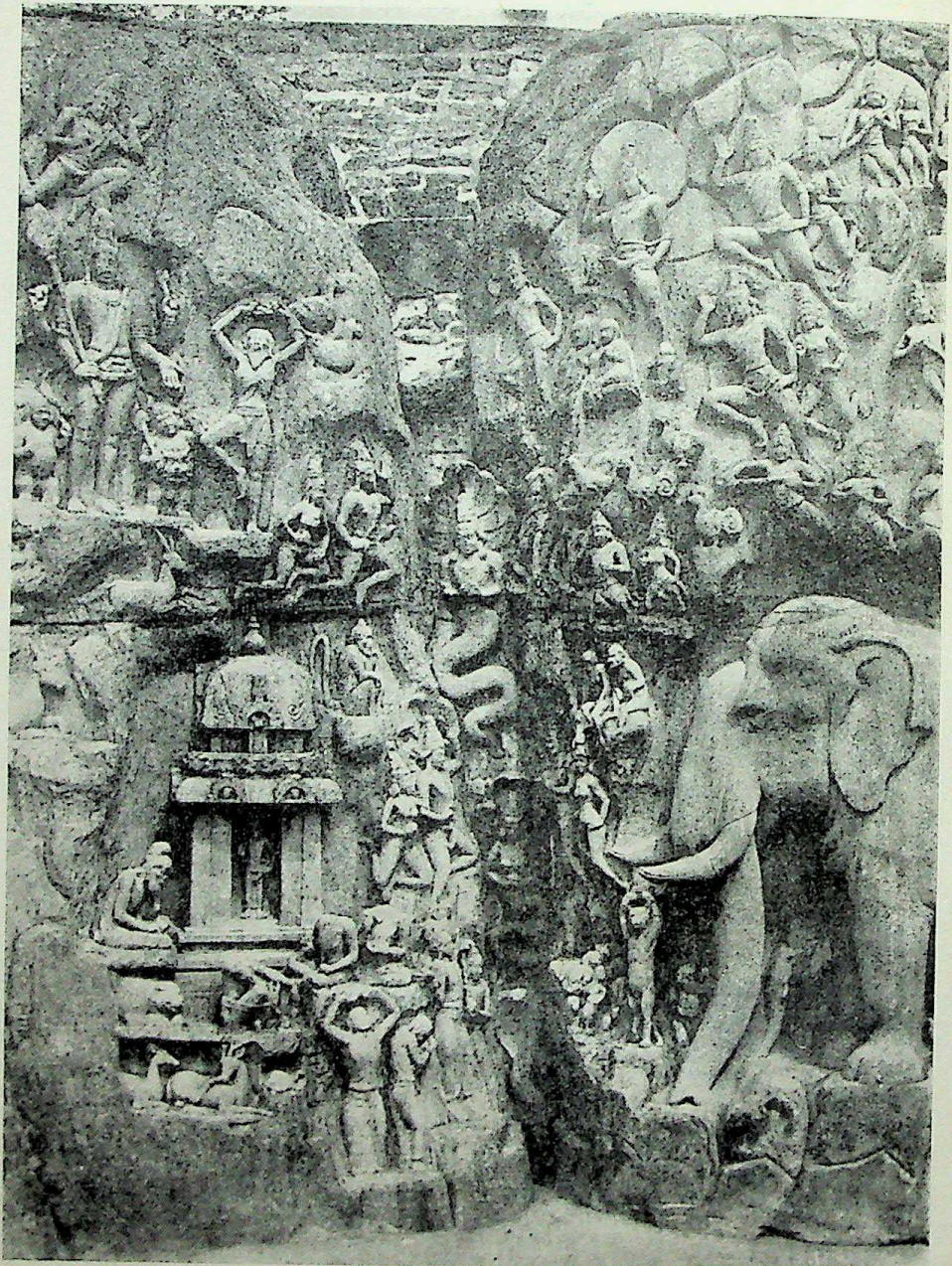


Fig. 38. Penance and *nityakarmānuṣṭhāna* — *snāna*, *sūryopasthāna*, *dīṅnamas-kāra*, *Vāsodaka*, etc. Pallava, 7th century A.D., Mahābalipuram, Tamil Nadu.

The sanctity of the Gaṅgā and the blessed life on her banks where gods, sages, men, birds and animals alike throng, is most vividly represented in the Mahābalipuram scene of Arjuna's penance on her banks near the mountain Raivataka (Fig. 38). We have only to glance at the description of the heavenly river in the *Kumārasambhava* to understand the sculpture more clearly.

As Kālidāsa has drawn attention to *āloka*, *avagāha* and *ācamana* by the celestials, we find in this significant sculpture all the Devas, including Sūrya, Candra, Siddhas, Vidyādhara, Yakṣas, Kinnaras and Nāgas approaching Gaṅgā from both sides. Gaṅgā herself is to be imagined as the stream in the cleft between the two rocks which are carved and, at the supposed location of the stream, there are Nāgas and Nāginīs to suggest water. That the stream flows from heaven to the earth is suggested by the many celestials in the upper region. Lower down, Ṛṣis and Munikumāras and a shrine for Viṣṇu suggest the Gaṅgā flowing on the earth. At the lowest point the Nāgas and the Diggaṇas suggest the netherworld where also she flows:

tribhis srotobhiraśrāntam punānā bhuvanatrayam
(*Kumārasambhava* x, 31)

and

śubhraiḥ abhramkaṣair ūrmiśataiḥ svarganivāsinām
kathayantīm ivālokāvagāhācamanādikam
susnātānām munīndrāṇām balikarmocitairalam
bahiḥ puṣpotkaraiḥ kīrṇatīrām dūrvākṣatānvitaiḥ
brahmadhyānaparair yogaparabrahmāsanasthitaiḥ
yoganidrāgatair yogapaṭṭabandhair upāśritām
pādānguṣṭhāgrabhūmisthaiḥ sūryasambaddhadrṣṭibhiḥ
brahmaṛṣibhiḥ param brahma gṛṇadbhir upasevitām
(*Kumārasambhava* x, 44-47).

The Ṛṣis engaged in meditation on the banks of the Gaṅgā are shown in exactly the same position as Kālidāsa has described them, some in *brahmāsana*, in *brahmadhyāna* and *yoganidrā*, with the *yogapaṭṭa*, a strip of cloth bound round their legs, and some, like Arjuna and Munikumāra, with their eyes turned towards the sun. Arjuna is depicted as an ascetic standing on his toe and doing severe penance. The Munikumāra is performing the *sūryopasthāna* after his *Sandhyā*, with his hands and fingers clasped in *yamapāśamudrā*, to look at the sun through the aperture so formed. The bath preceding the *Sandhyā* is indicated by another Munikumāra wringing water from his clothes. Yet another Munikumāra carries a vessel of water suggesting *baḷi* and *pūjā* during the course of which flowers and *akṣatās* are strewn about. This atmosphere of devotion has helped

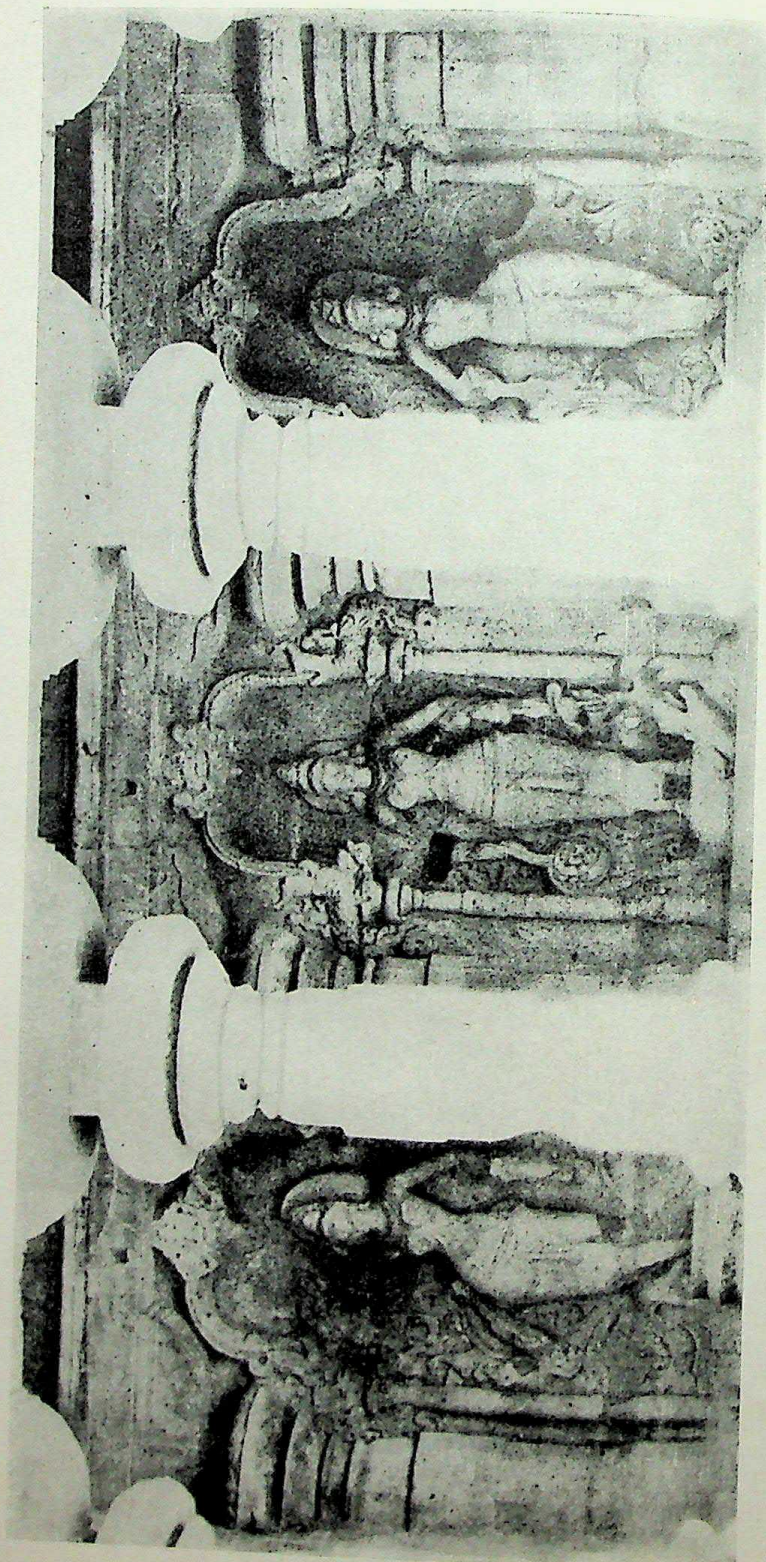


Fig. 39. The three streams, Sarasvatī, Gaṅgā and Yamunā, Rāṣṭrakuṭa, 8th century A.D. Ellora.

opposites like lion and deer, cat and mouse to come together, and the cat has so changed his habits that, instead of his usual *biḍālavrata*, he actually stands up in penance, like the most rigorous anchorite answering to the description:

sarāgānvayanirvāṇakārīṇī dharamadhārīṇī

(*Kumārasāmbhava* x, 30).

Gaṅgā, the principal stream in the Trivenī

One of the most important sculptural groups representing the rivers is from Ellora (Fig. 39) and it is unique as it portrays not only the two famous visible ones, Gaṅgā and Yamunā, but the triple stream that makes the great *saṅgama* at Trivenī. The three great rivers are shown as three goddesses in anthropomorphic form. This representation of personified rivers, especially those that compose the great Prayāgakṣetra, is important when we consider that such a stress is laid on them only in one other place, Udayagiri, where however the invisible river is omitted.

The sanctity of Sarasvatī, as she flows in the vicinity of the holy Kurukṣetra, is evident in the verse used by Mammaṭa in his book on rhetoric to illustrate *yamaka* or alliteration:

*sarasvati prasādam me sthitim cittasarasvati
sara svati kuru kṣetrakurukṣetrasarasvati*

(*Kāvyaaprakāśa* ix, 366).

The mind is here conceived of as being as pure as Kurukṣetra, and the blessing of Sarasvatī, the Goddess of Learning, by her presence in the mind, is as efficacious as the holy presence of this pure stream in the sacred soil of Kurukṣetra.

In fact, during the daily bath, every Hindu addresses the principal rivers and invokes their presence in the water. The same invocation to the rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Godāvarī, Narmadā, Sindhu and Kāverī is used while bathing the images of household deities during the daily *pūjā*. The influence of the rivers, like that of the great mountains, the Kulaparvatas, has been an abiding one on the Indian mind. It leapt with joy, as towards the mother, at the very sight of every one of these holy streams, and it is no wonder that they are honoured with the best of poetry and art. Yet invoking all the rivers, the one stream that is always uppermost in the mind is Gaṅgā. That is why a few drops of this holy stream, are poured into the lips of one's nearest and dearest on his deathbed as an assurance of liberation. And again, after cremation, the remains are brought

from every nook and corner of the country only to be immersed in the Ganges, the one stream that takes the front rank among all the rest.

The sanctity of Gaṅgā is such that all sins vanish the moment a drop from the stream touches the body. It is the realisation of this that almost restrained Appayyā Dikṣita in his sudden critical remark at Jagannātha, enjoying the company of his Yavani consort in the story of the imaginary meeting between the two. This is anything but a historical fact. Dikṣita is supposed to have remarked

*kim niśāṅkam śeṣe śeṣe vayasi samāgate mṛtyau
athava sukham śayīthā nikṣeṣe jāgarti jāhnavī jananī.*

He suddenly cuts himself short by saying, 'I am sorry for my remark, but it appears rather to be the other way about. Very close to you, mother Gaṅgā is quite alive to the situation.' It is as much as to say that Gaṅgā herself has permitted her beloved son, Jagannātha, to behave as he likes and who is Dikṣita to question her decision? The story goes that *Gaṅgālaharī*, the famous and beautiful hymn on Gaṅgā, was composed by him almost immediately in a spirit of remorse, and legend has it that the stream of the Gaṅgā mounted up the steps, one by one as the verses were composed, till finally, as he completed them, she washed away both Jagannātha and his consort into her stream, granting them eternal union and liberation from the bonds of birth and death true to the spirit of sympathy and forgiveness characteristic of a mother. She is prepared to excuse even the heinous crime of a child. For is it not true, as Śaṅkara says, that a wicked boy there may be, but not a wicked mother:

kuputro jāyeta kvacid api kumātā na bhavati.

Gaṅgā's purity is such that almost everywhere her sanctity is claimed in some stream or pool in different places. Vijayakṣetra, Nandikṣetra and Varāhakṣetra in Kashmir are described as places hallowed by Viṣṇu, where the stream of Gaṅgā bears the name Vitastā, and where the famous Maṇḍapakṣetra and Uttaramānasa are located. Here heinous sins are washed away even as the pilgrim approaches:

*gaccha kāśmīrān pāpanāśanān
yatra tad vijayakṣetram nandikṣetram ca pāvanam
vārāham yatra ca kṣetram ye pūtās cakrapāṇinā
dhatte nāma vitasteti vahantī yatra jāhnavī
yatra tanmaḍavakṣetram yatra cottaramānasam*

(*Kathāsaritsāgara*, 39, 36-38).

Another spot in Kashmir, Kramasaras, that rose from the footfall of Viṣṇu as Trivikrama, is hallowed by the presence of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva on a neighbouring mountain peak; and the stream that issued from the foot of Viṣṇu created, in Kashmir, another Gaṅgā called Ikṣuvatī, as if it were another Vitastā:

*yena viṣṇupadenānyā kāśmīreṣu surāpagā
sṛṣṭā ikṣuvatī nāma vitastā matsarād iva*

(*Kathāsaritsāgara* 73, 97).

This was a holy bathing place associated with all the miraculous charm that is claimed for Gaṅgā. A mythical spot in the netherworld is that assigned to Śiva as Hāṭakeśvara, on the banks of the Pātāla-gaṅgā, the Ganges of the lower region:

*. . . . uttīrya gaṅgām pātālavāhinīm ayam sa devaḥ
pātālanilayo hāṭakeśvaraḥ*

(*Kathāsaritsāgara* 73, 119-124).

It is interesting to find the term Hāṭakeśvara used for a similar deity in Indonesia and the sacred spot itself, Hāṭaka kṣetra. It is well known that the sacred Gaṅgā was invoked here also in some of the streams.

Gaṅgā is often conceived of as a goddess who would reveal herself now and then to help those on whom she lowers her compassionate glance. It was therefore a regular practice to undertake *tapasyā* not on the banks of any river or forest glade, preference being given to a bath in the Ganges and prayers on her banks. Literature teems with references to such devotional progress on the banks of the Ganges.

One particular story has it that, in despair a Brahmin swimming across the Ganges, having lost his friend, wished to put an end to his life; he prayed to the goddess Jāhnavī, Gaṅgā, plunging himself in the middle of the flood desiring to die. But the goddess appeared before him and gave him a charm which would render him either invisible or visible whichever he liked, assuring even sovereignty on earth. She disappeared only after reassuring him that he would find his friend again.

tāvadāvirabhūt sākṣāt gaṅgā tasyāmbumadhyataḥ

(*Kathāsaritsāgara* 74, 131).

Bones dropped in the Ganges could, just through contact with the celestial stream, transport the dead one to heaven, and this idea is often repeated in several contexts. In the well-known story of the maiden Mandāravatī, who was equally loved by three youths, the

latter, distracted with grief on her death, attended on her remains in different ways. One gathered her bones and dropped them into the Ganges. Of the other two, one used her ashes as his bed and the third, mad with grief, wandered as a mendicant but obtained a spell that could restore her to life. The one who dropped her bones in the sacred stream was considered her son, and he who restored her to life again was almost a father to her; but the one who lay on her ashes could alone be called her husband, for he alone embraced her mortal remains through his deep affection.

yascūsthīni nināyāsyā gaṅgāyām sa suto mataḥ

(*Kathāsaritsāgara* 76, 39).

8. Her Other Manifestations

Gaṅgā, abode of snakes

From the earliest times Nāgas have been associated with water, lakes, rivers, the ocean and the netherworld. There are certain Nāgas especially associated with Gaṅgā. In the *Harivaṁśa* there is mention of this type of Nāga residing in the Gaṅgā. It is well known from the *Mahābhārata* that Ulūpī, the Nāga princess, rose from the Gaṅgā, her home, at the sight of Arjuna who stood on the river-bank and, infatuated as she was with his beauty, she pulled him down into the water in order to induce him to marry her.

At Mahābalipuram, in the large group of rock carvings known as Arjuna's penance, Nāgas and Nāginīs are shown with hands clasped in adoration against the central cleft which suggests the stream of Gaṅgā on the banks of which Arjuna performed his penance. These Nāgas do not here represent, as they do usually, the netherworld; the *diggaṃṇas* do this; and as the repetition of this exposition is a blemish both in literature and in art, the snakes indicate Gaṅgā as the abode of the mighty Nāgas.

Again it is the Nāgas of the Ganges that made Bhīma what he was by adding prodigiously to his strength. In a garden on the banks of the Gaṅgā, Duryodhana invited his cousins for water-sport and as slumber overpowered them all at the close of the day, Bhīma was bound hand and foot at the instance of Duryodhana and dropped into the river, where, by chance he reached the abode of the Nāgas. Even the bite of the most venomous of the reptiles had no effect on him which instance naturally aroused their curiosity and admiration. When this came to the notice of Vāsuki, the lord of the snake world, he at once apprehended what had happened, welcomed Bhīma and gave him a draught of ambrosia that immediately multiplied his strength beyond all measure. So Nāgaloka itself is believed to be right under the Ganges, the depth of the river being unfathomable,

The tradition of the association of the Nāgas particularly with the Ganges continued, and when Buddha travelled from Rājagṛha to Śrāvastī, having had to cross the river Gaṅgā on the way, he allowed all including the king of Magadha to cross the stream by boat, while he himself with his devoted pupil, Ānanda, crossed the river on a bridge formed by the hoods of Nāgas that had specially come forward to be of some help to the Enlightened One and formed this unusual bridge.

The Nāgas are usually associated with treasures and are their guardians. It is not an unusual feature to find the container and the contained identified. Among the names of the nine well-known treasures, *Śaṅkha* and *Padma* are very prominent. They also happen to be the names of snakes or Nāgarājas. One passage from the *Mahāvastu* is very clear on this ancient association of the Nāgas with *Nidhis*, and some places, with famous Nāgas. Like *Padma* with Mithilā, *Śaṅkha* is associated with Banaras, both on the banks of the Ganges. The term *Śaṅkha* in the case of Nāgas such as *Śaṅkhaṇḍa*, *Śaṅkha*, *Śaṅkhaśūda*, *Śaṅkhamukha*, *Mahāśaṅkha*, etc., mentioned in the texts *Mahāvastu*, *Harivaṃśa* and the *Bhāgavata* illustrate how vital the term *Śaṅkha* was. In the city of Banaras itself, there is an ancient well, Nāgakuan, Nāgakūpa, dedicated to Nāgarāja Ananta or Śeṣa where on Nāgapañcamī day, there is a special festival. Even at Allāhābād, there is a temple for Vāsuki just overlooking the Ganges at Dārāgañj. Gaṅgā's purifying association with the snakes that considered themselves so inferior as to be sanctified even by the touch of Buddha's feet on their hoods, indicates why this sacred river was chosen as their abode.

Gaṅgā, the saviour of the Vasus

Kind-hearted Gaṅgā alone could save the Vasus from the curse that was inflicted on them: that of being born on earth. As Gaṅgā herself had to court the similar displeasure of a sage, she took upon herself the onerous task of restoring the Vasus to their heavenly abode (Fig. 31). This is why she became the glorious queen of Śantanu and the progenitor of the mighty Bhīṣma, the Pitāmaha of both the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. And this is why again Bhīṣma himself is Gāṅgeya. It is the intense desire of humans to associate themselves with the celestials, that explains the celestial river Viṣṇupadī becoming not only Bhāgīrathī, the daughter of Bhagīratha, or Haimavatī, the daughter of Himavān whose roots are in the earth though the summit is at Kailāsa, but also the queen of an earthly monarch, Śantanu himself, when she became the mother of the eight Vasus born on earth, including Bhīṣma who glorifies the progeny of Bharata.

Gaṅgā as mother of Śarajanmā

Śiva was a Mahāyogī, unruffled by and unyielding to Madana. But when at last for the good of the world, he discharged his *retas*, it was Agni who caught it up and unable to bear the effulgence of something so powerful, discharged it in the water of the Ganges where it collected amidst a number of reeds, *śarajāla*. It is here that the child Kārtikeya was born, six-fold, and fed by the Kṛttikās who had come to bathe in the Ganges and who, with maternal affection, suckled him. This baby with six heads and twelve arms was styled Kārtikeya, the infant of the Kṛttikās; Gāṅgeya, the child of Gaṅgā, who was, at the request of the gods, suckled by the celestial stream herself who assumed anthropomorphic form for the purpose,

*tam pāyayāmāsa sudhātīpūrṇam
surāpagā svam stanam āśu mūrtā*

(*Kumārasambhava* xi, 1) ;

Āgneya, the offspring of Agni, who was specially requested by the gods to hold the *retas* of Śiva, and Śarajanmā the infant born among the reeds of the Ganges where he was finally claimed by Gaurī herself. The birth of the warlord amidst *śara* or reeds which form the main part of the arrow is significant; for the birth of the child Skanda and the death of aged Bhīṣma on a bed of arrows, both sons of Gaṅgā, reveal that Gaṅgā was a Viramātā, a goddess triumphant and warlike and the parent of the highest warriorhood. The glory of Gaṅgā, who alone as one of the visible forms of Śiva, could sustain his brightest effulgence which exceeded even that of the sun,

*rakṣāhetor navaśaśibhṛtā vāsavīnām camūnām
atyādityam hutavahamukhe sambhṛtam taddhi tejah*

(*Meghadūta* i, 43)

is clearly indicated in the lines,

*śambhor ambumayī mūrtis saiva devī surāpagā
tvattaḥ smaradviṣo bījam durdharam dhārayiṣyati*

(*Kumārasambhava* x, 26) ;

surasarid iva tejo vahniniṣṭhyūtam aiśam (*Raghuvamśa* ii, 75).

Gaṅgā is the mother of Skanda. Her glory is in no small measure enhanced by this child of golden hue, born of the Gangetic stream. It is also a symbol of the fact that gold dust is obtained from the bed of the Ganges and is styled Gāṅgeya.

Her Other Manifestations

Pride in bringing Gaṅgā home

Lost in legend and myth is the favourite story of Bhagīratha who performed severe penance to please both Brahmā and Śiva, to the one to allow the flow of Gaṅgā and to the other to hold her for a while so that her force might not destroy the universe. But there is a greater and more fascinating historical event of only a thousand years ago, of how Rājendracoḷa, one of the greatest emperors in medieval Indian history, who greatly desired the Gaṅgā in his own newly established capital close to the huge temple erected by him as thanksgiving for his victory to Śiva, brought a huge quantity of Gaṅgā's water from where she flows in north India to the region of the Coḷas. A glance at his Tiruvālaṅkāḍu plates amuses us when we realise that he criticised even his own ancestor Bhagīratha for having obtained the stream of the celestial river from Śiva through begging.

*tapahprabhāvādavatīrṇagaṅgam
bhagīratham bāhubalāddhasan saḥ
gaṅgājalaiḥ pāvayitum svakīyām
īyeṣa pṛthvīm ravivamśadīpah*

That royal light of the solar race laughed at Bhagīratha who had Gaṅgā descend on earth by the intensity of his penance and decided to purify his part of the land by bringing the holy Gaṅgā by the might of his arm to it, (*South Indian Inscriptions*, III, p. 400). Of course as a devotee he bows to Śiva, but as a Kṣatriya prince, he feels that imploring Śiva even for Gaṅgā was not a proper stance. By his own might and by overcoming the rulers of the Gangetic plain, the Pālas and the Gāhaḍavālas, Rājendra brought the waters of the Ganges to Gaṅgaikoṇḍacolapuram. The only tribute that he asked of the defeated hosts was Ganges water, brought by the vanquished princes in large vessels loaded on troops of elephants, all the way from the north to the south:

*vijitais tadīyataṭabhūmināyakais
salilam tadīyam atha pāvanam param
nījanāyakāya mathurāntakāya tat
samanīnayat sapadi daṇḍanāyakah*

(*South Indian Inscriptions* III, p. 400).



Fig. 40. Commemorative Gold Coin of Rājendra Coḷa, Coḷa tiger flanked by Cera bow and Pāṇḍya fish with legend on obverse and reverse in Nāgarī : *Gaṅgai-koṇḍa Coḷaḥ*, 11th century A.D., National Museum.

The discovery of a Gāhaḍavāla inscription in the temple of Śiva at Gaṅgaikoṇḍacoḷapuram mentioning the Coḷa emperor as sovereign lord makes this event significant. The issuing of a special commemorative gold coin (Fig. 40) with the obverse and reverse identical to emphasise the importance of the bringing of the Gaṅgā home, by imprinting the legend *Gaṅgaikoṇḍacoḷaḥ* in Nāgarī script, speaks volumes for the esteem in which Gaṅgā was held. Rājendra mentions the twelve mile long tank named Coḷagaṅgā that he dug in his capital and used for holding the waters of the Gaṅgā, as a 'liquid pillar of victory,' *Gaṅgā jalamayajayastambha*:

*Coḷagaṅgam iti khyātyā prathitam nijamaṇḍale
gaṅgājalamayam dhīro jayastambham vyadhatta saḥ*
(*South Indian Inscriptions* III, p. 400).

This is one of the great historical episodes in which the glory of Gaṅgā stands out most prominently.

Pride of rule over Gangetic territory

The area watered by the Ganges has always been considered the sacred land, *puṇyabhūmi*. In fact, this idea was so prominent in the minds of successive kings that the Guptas alluded to Gaṅgā with pride. In an inscription of Samudragupta's, the rippling of Gaṅgā on the *jaṭās* of Śiva is especially mentioned, undoubtedly with pride, because the Guptas ruled a vast area of the plains watered by the sacred river, their own fame as immaculate as the stream. Their fame mounting higher and higher enhanced by the four expedients of appeasement, liberality, the playing off of one against another and overcoming by might speedily purifies the three worlds like the immaculate waters of the Gaṅgā released from their confinement in the caverns of Paśupati's locks:

*pradānabhujavikramaprasāmaśāstravākya-dayair
uparyupari sañcayocchṛitam anekamārgam yaśaḥ
punāti bhuvanatrayam paśupaterjaṭāntarguhā-
nirodhaparimokṣaśīgrham iva pāṇḍu gāṅgam payaḥ*
(*Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* III, p. 9).



Fig. 41. Khaḍga Gold Coin of Kumārāgupta, observe : King on horse fighting rhinoceros and legend *bhartā Khaḍgaṭrātā Kumārāgupto jayatyaniśam*; reverse: Gaṅgā standing on *makara*, umbrella held over her and legend *Śrī Mahendra-Khaḍga*, National Museum.

Her Other Manifestations

Normally Rājyalakshmī, the goddess of prosperity, seated on a lion with feet resting on a lotus carrying the cornucopia and noose, signifying *kośa* and *daṇḍa* respectively, figures on the reverse of almost all of the dynasty's coins. But pride in ruling over the Gangetic area is specially indicated in the figure of the river goddess on her *makara* shown on the reverse of some coins such as the tiger slayer type of Samudragupta's time and the Khadgatrātā type of Kumāragupta (Fig. 41). As in the case of the figure of Devasenā fondling the peacock, the mount of her warlord, whose army she personifies, and which theme indirectly suggests Kumāragupta, the king himself, with his army as powerful as that of the celestials', *devasenā*, Gaṅgā on the reverse of the coins here suggests how pure and spotless was the fame of the Gupta kings and how wonderfully watered by the sacred stream was their vast and prosperous empire, stretching from Punjab to Assam. Incidentally, the rhino-hunt type of coin is indicative of the home of the rhino, Assam, that came under the rule of the Guptas. Gaṅgā on *makara* in these Gupta coins is again a unique feature, and a glorification of the sacred river, association with whom, through their territory, the Guptas greatly prided.

Inspiration of Gaṅgā in islands beyond the seas

The spirit of Gaṅgā worship travelled with the pious Hindu wherever he went, and it is no wonder that in far-off Indonesia in central Java, an inscription on a huge boulder near the well-known spring called Tuk Mas, 'the Golden Spring' near the volcano Merbabu is a verse in Pallava Grantha characters of about the fifth century A.D., glorifying the spring as being nearly as sacred as the holy river Gaṅgā herself:

. . . . *uśucyamburuhānujātā*
kvacicchilāvālukanirgateyam
kvacitprakīrṇā śubhaśītatoyā
saṁprasr̥tā medhyakarīva Gaṅgā.

'(Here) flows forth (the streamlet) purifying as the Ganges, arising out of the bright (?) lotus . . . at some places gushing out of the sand and stones, and at others widening its limpid and cool waters.'



Fig. 42. River goddess with jets of water issuing from *pūṇakumbha* breasts as from a fountain, Śailendra, 11th century A.D., Belahan, East Java.

Dr. B. C. Chhabra's query as to whether the first line refers to Viṣṇu's lotus feet from which Gaṅgā sprang and to which this spring is likened, is answered in the affirmative. In Campa, the My-son stele inscription dated A.D. 657 mentions a Gaṅgarāja who renounced the throne to take to a life on the banks of the Jāhnavī or Ganges:

prāyād ato jāhnavīm.

In east Java, the famous carving of Viṣṇu on Garuḍa representing Erlaṅga has carved on the walls of a monument in its vicinity, river goddesses with their nipples spurting jets of water in the beautifully conceived and constructed fountain (Fig. 42). This idea of water oozing from the breast follows from the line:

*yo hemakumbhastananissṛtānām
skandasya mātuh payasām rasajñāḥ*

(*Raghuvamśa* ii, 36).

It is the taste of the water issuing from the pitcher-like breasts of the mother of Skanda. The mother of Skanda could be either Pārvatī or Gaṅgā, but in this case, the appropriateness of the image is inclined towards Gaṅgā. Actually, Gaṅgā holding a water vessel, as she should be depicted according to the iconographic text of the *Viṣṇudharmot-tara*, allows the jet to issue forth from her breast. It is the appreciation and perpetuation of this concept of Gaṅgā in eleventh century Java that should especially arrest our attention.

The greatness of Gaṅgā is not easily recounted. Sight of her purifies, bathing in her waters frees one from sin, the utterance of her name transports one by a magic ladder, as it were, to the highest heaven. The Indian sculptor has not in the least lagged behind the bard, who has sung the glories of this great river, in presenting her in all her glorious aspects. Like Vālmīki who describes Puṣpaka and, not being fully satisfied, goes again and again into ecstasies over it, Kālidāsa excels himself in his description of Gaṅgā wherever opportunity occurs and especially in the tenth canto of the *Kumārasaṁbhava*. In his own words let us put the same question:

kam nābhinandayatyēṣā dṛṣṭā pīyūṣavāhinī

(*Kumārasaṁbhava* x, 48).

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